The New Criterion

October 1989

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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The New Criterion *October 1989*

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Jed Perl's book, *Paris Without End,* has been published by North Point Press.

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C. H. Sisson's most recent book is *God Bless Karl Marx* (Carcanet).

Lauren Weiner reviewed A. B. Yehoshua's *Five Seasons* for our April issue.

Karen Wilkin wrote on the Goya exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum for our September issue.

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Notes & Comments: October 1989

Hammer and sickle as cutting edge, or, Gorbasm in the art world

Some months ago the *International Herald-Tribune* in Paris coined the useful term "Gorbasm" to describe the mindless euphoria with which the Western media were responding to the public-relations initiatives of Mikhail Gorbachev. By extension, the word can also be used to describe the kind of amnesiac emotional transport that now attaches to every announcement—and nowadays such announcements come thick and fast—of joint Soviet-American art programs. The Gorbasm factor has indeed emerged as the *dernier cri* of the American art establishment, which has been quick to espy in the vagaries of glasnost and perestroika new opportunities both for extending its influence abroad and for launching new fashions at home.

Consider the show of American art that is currently on view in Moscow in the exhibition halls of the Union of Soviet Artists. With a cavalier indifference to or ignorance of recent Soviet history, the show is called "Painting Beyond the Death of Painting." To the show's American organizers, of course, a phrase like "the death of painting" now means nothing more than a profitable episode in an ongoing promotional campaign for new art styles. To many Russians, however, the phrase is likely to signify something quite different—the long dark night of Socialist Realism, which in Russia really did bring about the death of painting for decades. Moreover, as art of no other persuasion was legally allowed to circulate from Stalin's day until quite recent times, this enforced death of painting also meant the Gulag (or worse) for those who either refused to conform to the official line or, misreading the periodic signs of a "thaw" in cultural policy, had the misfortune to get caught in the irrational reversals of the system.

None of this grim history is irrelevant to the present sponsorship of the American exhibition in Moscow. During those long dark decades, the Union of Soviet Artists served the Communist Party apparatus as an agency of brutal enforcement. The Artists Union was never simply an artists' organization in the Western sense. It was an instrument of Party repression, an organization that inflicted immense suffering on whatever remnant of genuine artistic aspiration survived in Russia.

Why American artists should hasten to lend themselves to the rehabilitation of this odious organization of conscienceless political hacks is a question that remains to be answered. Certainly it would have been unthinkable for these same American artists—among them, Julian Schnabel, Alex Katz, Lucas Samaras, Mel Bochner, and Rudolf Baranik—to have collaborated with

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the agency that enforced Hitler's doctrine of "degenerate" art. Yet the Union of Soviet Artists was no different in kind from its Nazi counterpart, and it held sway over the life of art in Russia for a much longer time than the Nazis ruled in Germany.

But in the West memories are short, where they can be said to exist at all, especially when new opportunities beckon and the future promises still greater Gorbasmic delights. So there is now assembled in Moscow this exhibition of thirty-three American painters sponsored by the Union of Soviet Artists. It is, in the words of the official press release—issued, for some reason, by a PR outfit in Beverly Hills, California—"curated by Donald Kuspit in cooperation with such galleries as Pace, Castelli, Marlboro [*sic*], and Sonnabend."

As for where this prolonged art-world Gorbasm is heading, there can be little doubt. The show in Moscow is only a curtain-raiser. The main events will take place over here. On the New York art scene—and probably in the Western world generally—the early 1990s looks to be an era of Soviet chic. The mandate of heaven may have been withdrawn from the doctrine of Revolution, but this change in the political weather will only aid in transforming the hammer and sickle into the latest symbol of the cutting edge. And when the Artists Union in Moscow starts sending us *their* counterparts to Kiefer, Clemente, and company, the applause will be deafening and the sales brisk.

Spreading culture

A recent arrival in the office of *The New Criterion* announced, via the cozy medium of a form letter, the birth of a new academic publication. Now being born by the University Museum of Archeology/Anthropology out of the University of Pennsylvania, *Public Culture* will be a journal devoted to reporting and reflecting "current research on the cultural transformations associated with cities, media, and consumption." This reportage is to include "such cultural forms as cinema, video, television, sports, restaurants, domestic tourism, advertising, fiction, architecture, and museums."

"Well—there it is," as the Emperor of Austria wittily remarked in Peter Shaffer's play *Amadeus*. The definition of culture, hitherto so circuitous, clumsy, and confused in the works of Coleridge, Arnold, Ruskin, Pater, and Eliot, has now been provided for us in a very few word-processed lines. The road thus traversed has led from self-improvement to self-description, and in so doing has taken us from self-aspiration to self-congratulation.

It is tempting indeed to mock the present entombment of culture and civilization in anthropology and sociology. Unlike most temptations, this one should not be resisted. What is at stake here is not the preservation of upscale entertainment for upscale earners, or the unthinking museumification of all man-made things so blithely recommended by New York University President John Brademas some years ago in a speech to an international conference on art museums in (of all places) Italy. What is at stake is nothing less than the survival of the life of the mind, a life lived not by what Edward Shils has called "*Fachidioten*" (specialty-idiots) but by full participants in the daily routines of mankind—earning a living, providing for a family, and deciding the political organization of society.

One might have thought that the renascence of this life of the mind could be set in motion by an invocation of the reigning creator-deities of civilization: the poets, artists, musicians, and philosophers made permanent in great books, art, and institutions. Now, thanks to the work of the erstwhile protectors of civilization—among whom must now be counted the University of Pennsylvania—such invocations fall on deaf ears. And so a double work is necessary. First, a relentless criticism of the degradation of standards by those appointed (and

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self-appointed) to preserve art and learning; second, a painstaking attempt to unearth, explain, and clean what now seems very much like a lost canon. In this effort, the greenery that now grows on the University of Pennsylvania looks less like ivy than poison ivy.

"The showbizification of the world"

The process that converted a minor literary diversion by T. S. Eliot—*Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*—into a major international money-making machine called *Cats* was bound sooner or later to make itself felt beyond the realm of commercial theater. Success of this kind on this scale has a way of affecting much that lies beyond the short-term goals of the production itself. One unintended consequence of *Cats*'s phenomenal profits, for example, is said to be the financial bonanza it has brought to the house of Faber & Faber, Eliot's publisher and for many years his employer. No one in 1939 could have imagined that a routine subsidiary-rights clause in the contract for *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* might, half a century later, save its publisher from going the way of so many distinguished firms—straight into bankruptcy or else absorption into a conglomerate with cultural horizons scarcely distinguishable from those of the producers of *Cats*. This is truly an irony of Eliotic proportions.

So much for the good news. There are, however, some consequences of *Cats*'s success that look to be a good deal less benign. One of them, certainly, is the $2.6 million endowment lately established at Oxford University by Cameron Macintosh, whose runaway successes include *Les Misérables* and *The Phantom of the Opera* as well as *Cats*, for the ostensible purpose of supporting "student drama." The immediate result of this dubious benefaction has been the appointment of Stephen Sondheim as Oxford's first Visiting Professor of Drama and Musical Theater. According to a report in *The New York Times*, Mr. Sondheim "is to begin his visit in January and serve the rest of the academic year." Oxford is not creating a department of drama with Mr. Macintosh's money, and Mr. Sondheim will give no formal lectures. Instead, as the *Times* reports, he will "work with students through workshops, master classes and observing productions of his musicals." Which probably means, among much else, that the commercial theater has now acquired a facility at Oxford for the creation of a good many more *Cats*.

The best comment we have seen on this unhappy affair is that of John Gross, now the theater critic for the London *Sunday Telegraph*. "If a chair of drama had been established at Oxford 50 years ago," Mr. Gross wrote on August 6, "it would probably have been offered, at a guess, to someone like Harley Granville Barker—a distinguished all-round man of the theatre, rooted in Shakespeare and the classics, alert to the creative currents of his own time. But this is 1989, and now that the chair finally exists, the first incumbent is to be Stephen Sondheim." Mr. Gross continued:

> Nothing very surprising there. The appointment is simply one more small step in a familiar process, the gradual showbizification of the world. And at least Sondheim represents contemporary entertainment at its most polished and probing.
>
> Or does he? And if he does, how good is the best? The revival of his 1973 musical *A Little Night Music* at the Chichester Festival Theatre stirs up some dark misgivings. It is stylish and energetic; it approaches both text and score with obvious respect—and it leaves you feeling that the emperor's clothes are pretty ragged.

Mr. Gross concluded his review of the revival of *A Little Night Music* by observing that nothing "can disguise the shallowness of the piece itself." And this is to be the model that Oxford, thanks to *Cats*, will now offer to its students of drama. Apparently it is not only universities on this side of the Atlantic that are suffering a crisis of standards.

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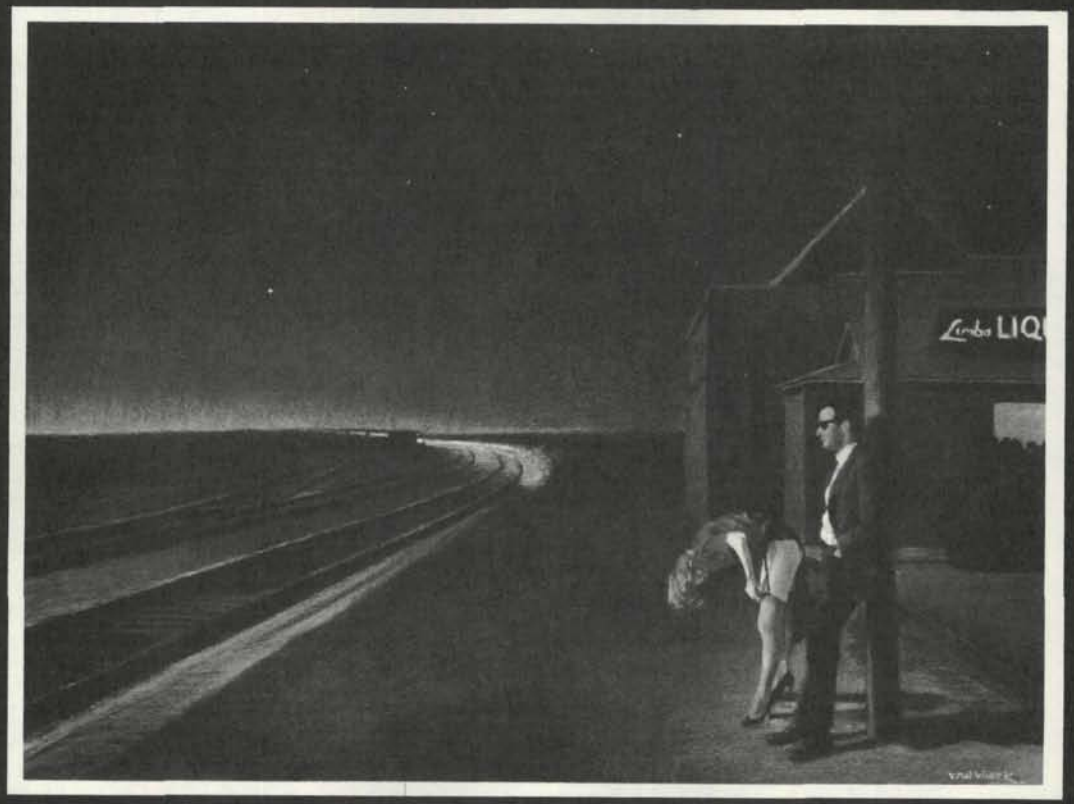

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The contemporary sophist

by Roger Kimball

"You see before you," he began, "a man who once believed in the possibility of interpretation. That is, I thought that the goal of reading was to establish the meaning of texts."
—Morris Zapp, in David Lodge's *Small World*

"What I say is that 'just' or 'right' means nothing but what is to the interest of the stronger party."
—Thrasymachus, in *The Republic*

At a moment when the assault on the humanities by deconstruction and other French imports seems to be giving way to ever more knowing, overtly political forms of rebuke, few figures better embody the academy's revolt against its traditional goals than the critic and polemicist Stanley Fish. Not that Professor Fish is a newcomer. His early book, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (1967), helped to inaugurate the so-called "reader response" school of literary theory—according to which the meaning of a literary work inheres not in the text but in the interpretive acts of its readers—and instantly established its author's reputation as a powerful and ingenious critical intelligence.

Professor Fish's later works include a book on the religious poet George Herbert and a study of seventeenth-century literature. But his next professional tour de force came in 1980, when he published *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. This influential collection of essays from the 1970s, most of which are exercises in literary theory as distinct from literary criticism, consolidated and extended Professor Fish's reputation as a formidable academic critic. It continued in an increasingly radical key his project of "dislodging [the text] as the privileged container of meaning" and, not quite incidentally, it presented to the reading public the figure of an able and fiercely contentious rhetorician whose name has ever since been at the forefront of academic literary controversy.

Professor Fish, who received his Ph.D. from Yale in 1962, taught for several years at the University of California at Berkeley and then at Johns Hopkins University before going to Duke University in 1985. Today, as we are reminded on the colophon page of his lengthy new collection of essays, *Doing What Comes Naturally*,[1] he is simultaneously "Arts and Sciences Professor of English, Professor of Law, and Chair of the Department of English at Duke University." This impressive triple-barreled title not only suggests the heights to which Professor Fish's academic career has risen, it also neatly summarizes his accomplishments. The dual appointment to a university chair in English and a professorship in law acknowledges Professor Fish's success in his diverse intellectual endeavors. For while he began his career as a scholar of seventeenth-century

1 *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies*, by Stanley Fish; Duke University Press, 613 pages, $35.

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English literature, he now devotes much of his attention to the law, teaching courses in the Duke Law School and publishing about as often in university law reviews as in literary journals.

It must also be understood that his position as chairman of the Duke English department is no merely honorific administrative post. More than any other individual, Professor Fish must be credited—if "credited" is the correct term—with fashioning the contemporary Duke English department. It was largely through his initiatives (backed by generous amounts of money from the university, which had "targeted" the English department for "development") that Duke has been transformed in just a few years from a genteel though perhaps unexciting academic conclave into a bastion of every "advanced" and radical trend currently besetting the humanities. Along with providing lavish new offices for the chairman and a select group of professors, the English department in short order acquired a number of professors well known for their antipathy to traditional humanistic study. In a series of much-publicized and unusually high-paying appointments, the university hired veteran critical theorists like Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Frank Lentricchia, Annabel Patterson and her husband, Lee Patterson, and Professor Fish's wife, Jane Tompkins, as well as younger aspirants like the radical feminist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Together with the much-celebrated Marxist critic Fredric Jameson, who (among his other titles) is chairman of Duke's Graduate Program in Literature, this cadre of chic theorists and literary activists has made Duke one of the most influential anti-traditionalist forces in contemporary academic literary studies.

It is another measure of the extent to which Professor Fish has insinuated himself into the imagination of his discipline that he should have served (or so it is widely rumored) as the model for the character Morris Zapp in *Small World* (1984), David Lodge's hilariously scathing satire of the high-powered, jet-setting Lit. Crit. world, with its international conferences, sordid professional intrigues, and fabulous salaries and perquisites for the lucky few who prevail. Whether or not Mr. Lodge really had Professor Fish in mind when he created Morris Zapp, anyone familiar with Professor Fish's work can easily imagine him defending as his own the quotation from *Small World* that stands at the head of this essay. (He would endorse Thrasymachus's words, too, as we shall see.) And given Professor Fish's long-standing interest in the subject of "professionalism," one can also imagine him responding as did Morris Zapp when, after delivering a paper entitled "Textuality as Striptease," he is asked by an exasperated colleague, "Then what in God's name *is* the point of it all?" "The point [of literary interpretation], of course," replies Zapp coolly, "is to uphold the institution of academic literary studies. We maintain our position in society by publicly performing a certain ritual, just like any other group of workers in the realm of discourse—lawyers, politicians, journalists."

As it happens, the issue of "professionalism"—what an earlier generation might have called "gamesmanship"—goes a long way toward helping one understand the course of Professor Fish's stunning academic career. Rather like the ambitious Morris Zapp, he is wont to insist that teaching and writing about literature is a profession like any other, concerned more with self-perpetuation and self-aggrandizement than with the disinterested pursuit of knowledge. In fact, Professor Fish—again like Morris Zapp, as well as so many real-life academics today—denies that the traditional scholarly ideal of disinterestedness is even possible, let alone desirable. He repeatedly warns his colleagues against the snares of "anti-professionalism," which he defines as "any attitude or argument that enforces a distinction between professional labors on the one hand and the identification and promotion of what is true or valuable on the other." Such attitudes might be useful as an occasional corrective, Professor Fish admits;

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he even refers to such anti-professionalism as the "conscience" of the profession. But at bottom he argues that the attempt to distinguish between mere professional activity and (for example) the disinterested pursuit of truth is a mistake that encourages precisely the kind of false idealism that leads one to ask embarrassing questions like "What is the point of studying literature?"

In accordance with his own precepts, Professor Fish has been nothing if not "professional." One important expression of his professionalism has been his knack of keeping his criticism one short, provocative step ahead of the criticism practiced by the majority of his colleagues. Indeed, looking back over the development of his career, one sees that he early on perfected what Jean Cocteau described as the art of knowing just how far to go in going too far. Thus in *Surprised by Sin*, written at a time when the New Criticism, though waning, was still regnant in the academy, Professor Fish made the daring suggestion that the key to the meaning of *Paradise Lost* lay not in Milton's complex text but in the reader's own struggle with that complexity. We are told that, because Milton wanted the experience of struggling with the poem's syntax to mimic the experience of struggling with and facing up to one's own sinfulness, he wrote in a convoluted style that deliberately confused and stymied his readers. It is only when the reader sees through his confusion, usually at the end of a sentence when he at last comes to the verb, that Milton's intended pattern of moral education—"mistake, correction, instruction"—is fulfilled. In this sense, Professor Fish argues, *Paradise Lost* continually traces "the reader's humiliation and his education."

Of course, it does seem odd that, if this really were Milton's intention, no one noticed it before Stanley Fish. One would have thought such a lofty moral design would have been more accessible to ordinary mortal scrutiny. But even odder is the caliber of the reader of Milton that Professor Fish assumes. While Professor Fish pursued his case with considerable erudition, ingenuity, and even brilliance, the reader he posits is a model of obtuseness. He never quite wises up to Milton's supposed intentions and is certainly too shallow a fellow to appreciate the argument of *Surprised by Sin*. As the critic Frederick Crews has observed, Professor Fish's reader is a straw man, "a dunce—a Charlie Brown who, having had the syntactic football yanked away a hundred times, would keep right on charging it in perfect innocence, never learning to suspend judgment until he arrived at the poet's verb."

Professor Fish has long since abandoned the "reader response" suppositions he argued for in *Surprised by Sin*. But he has continued in his role of intellectual provocateur, sprinkling his work with arguments and asides that seem designed as much to taunt his readers as to enlighten them. Why else would he have blithely described his style of criticism as a "superior fiction," whose very status as fiction, he writes, "relieves me of the obligation to be right . . . and demands only that I be interesting"? Again, it must be noted that Professor Fish later abandoned this Wildean assertion from the mid-1970s, calling it "the most unfortunate sentence I ever wrote." (His readers may wish to propose alternative candidates for that honor.) Yet it is difficult to know quite what to make of Professor Fish's repudiations. There are so many of them. The truth is that he has made a speciality of disowning the provocative statements that had earlier gained him the notice—if often the irritated notice—of his peers. The detailed introduction to *Is There a Text in This Class?*, for example, traces the development of the notion of "interpretive communities" and is a veritable inventory of his own discarded positions, each abandoned for one slightly more extreme or, to use a word he favors, "subversive."

Professor Fish's habit of denying the positions he had once forcefully insisted upon might simply be evidence of his unusual openness to criticism and willingness to change his mind when confronted with superior arguments. But a suspicious observer might wonder whether the driving

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force of his intellectual life is not truth but the desire for a certain notoriety. The question is whether pronouncements like the one quoted above are products of momentary exaggeration—incautiously penned in the heat of debate, perhaps—or whether they are the result of deliberate calculation and a striving for effect.

Doing What Comes Naturally effectively answers that question and a good many others that one might have about the nature and lasting value of the work of this influential critic and academic entrepreneur. Part of a new series from Duke anomalously called "Post-Contemporary Interventions," *Doing What Comes Naturally* contains twenty-two essays, all but three of which have appeared previously in one form or another.[2] After a long introduction setting forth the author's current credo, the book is divided into four sections: Meaning and Constraint, Professionalism, Consequences, and Rhetoric. The essays thus range freely over Professor Fish's standard repertoire. And as with everything Professor Fish writes, the pieces collected here are clearly written and display both wit and learning. Unlike many of his colleagues, at Duke and elsewhere, Professor Fish not only does his homework but also values clarity of expression. It is noteworthy, though, that none of the essays in this bulky volume concerns itself explicitly with a literary text considered *as literature*. About as close as we get to literature is an essay called "Transmuting the Lump," which deals with the changing critical fortunes of books XI and XII of *Paradise Lost*. But even here, the poem is adduced solely in order to illustrate the politics of literary taste in contemporary English studies. Appropriately, the essay appears in the section entitled "Professionalism."

True, literary texts are often mentioned in *Doing What Comes Naturally*. But Professor Fish—and here, alas, he resembles many of his colleagues in English and comparative literature throughout the country—seems to have given up literary criticism in order to play at being a philosopher. Accordingly, several essays deal with what for lack of a better term one may call the philosophy of language. Some of these advance Professor Fish's views on rhetoric, about which more below. ("[R]hetorical," he correctly notes, is "a master-word" in these essays.) Others explicate and criticize rival theories of language and meaning. Typical of the latter is a lengthy piece that compares the work of the doyen of French deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, to that of the British ordinary-language philosopher J. L. Austin. One would hardly have thought this a subject to inspire humor, but who can resist an incredulous smile when Professor Fish confides that "Derrida is very much a philosopher of common sense," that "[o]ne might even say, with the proper qualifications, that he is a philosopher of ordinary language"? In order to appreciate the extent to which Derrida is a philosopher of "common sense" and "ordinary language," consider this passage, of about average clarity, from the main article by Derrida upon which Professor Fish bases his claim:

> A written sign is proffered in the absence of the receiver. How to style this absence? One could say that at the moment when I am writing, the receiver may be absent from my

2 This series, incidentally, is edited by the indefatigable Professor Fish and his colleague Fredric Jameson. One may safely hazard that the nonsensical phrase "post-contemporary" was the result of a search for something even more up-to-date than "post-modern"—that ubiquitous but nonetheless catachrestic term that, as Professor Fish observes of those old workhorses "structuralist," "post-structuralist," and their cognates, has had something of a period flavor for some time now. The addition of the word "interventions" is obviously meant to impart an aura of decisive activism: as if the series comprised not mere books but political acts. An outsider cannot of course be certain about the genesis of the title, but in Professor Fish's defense it must be said that this aggressively barbarous phrase has all the earmarks of being Professor Jameson's brainchild.

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> field of present perception. But is not this absence merely a distant presence, one which is delayed or which, in one form or another, is idealized in its representation? This does not seem to be the case, or at least this distance, divergence, delay, this deferral must be capable of being carried to a certain absoluteness of absence if the structure of writing, assuming that writing exists, is to constitute itself. It is at that point that the difference as writing could no longer (be) an (ontological) modification of presence.[3]

Well, one thing really does seem clear from Professor Fish's description of Derrida as a philosopher of common sense and ordinary language: they talk different down there in Durham, North Carolina.

Doing What Comes Naturally also contains a half dozen pieces on the law, including three much-discussed attacks on the work of the legal theorist Ronald Dworkin ("Working on the Chain Gang," "Wrong Again," "Still Wrong After All These Years"), as well as, under the rubric "Professionalism," a well-known essay entitled "No Bias, No Merit." In this essay, Professor Fish argues against the policy many academic journals follow of accepting articles for publication only after they have been submitted to a blind peer review. Now, there are plenty of reasons to be wary of this policy; often it seems blind in more than the desired sense of "impartial." But how many sought-after academics would admit that they oppose it because it prevents them from cashing in on their reputations? "I am against blind submission," Professor Fish proclaims with characteristic bravura, "because the fact that my name is attached to an article greatly increases its chances of getting accepted . . . . I have paid my dues and earned the benefit of the doubt I now enjoy and don't see why others shouldn't labor in the vineyards as I did."

It is important to note that Professor Fish's case against the policy of blind submission goes well beyond this expression of blatant self-interest. In fact, at the center of his animus is a contention that, in one way or another, surfaces in nearly every article in *Doing What Comes Naturally*. Professor Fish duly acknowledges that the intention behind the blind-submission policy is to minimize bias and provide the proverbial "level playing field" for the hordes of academics hungry for publications to add to their résumés. But he rejects the idea that bias is a problem; more specifically, he rejects the idea that, given the limitations of human knowledge, the notion of bias is even *intelligible*. "[B]ias," he writes, "is just another word for seeing from a particular perspective as opposed to seeing from no perspective at all, and since seeing from no perspective at all is not a possibility, bias is a condition of consciousness and therefore of action."

When he is not being deliberately provocative, Professor Fish has a tendency to present the obvious as if it were a stunning discovery. In "Critical Self-Consciousness, Or Can We Know What We're Doing?" he explains how it is that even our best efforts to be impartial turn out to be biased. "[W]e say to ourselves," he writes, "'with respect to this matter I am going to put aside my interests, preferences and biases; and consider the evidence and alternatives in an impartial manner.'" In his view, what this resolution overlooks is "the extent to which the specification of what is and is not an 'impartial manner' is itself an 'interested' act, that is, an act performed within a set of assumptions" about what will count as evidence. Hence, he concludes, it is an ineluctably "*partial*" view of the world. Rightly understood, this would seem to be an unexceptionable point. For what does it portend except that our ideas have a history, that they arise in particular circumstances and are the products of diverse situations? Does any of this dilute by one iota the ideal of impartiality?

The answer is no, but for Professor Fish the insight that we are not gods, endowed

3 Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Limited Inc* (Northwestern University Press, 1988), translated by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, p. 7.

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with perfect knowledge, seems to have come as a shocking revelation. It leads him to one of his chief polemical points—a point made repeatedly in this volume: namely, that we are imprisoned by our interpretive schemes. Traditionally, reflection has been seen as a means of achieving critical distance on these schemes; reflecting on our point of view, we in some sense transcend that point of view, appreciate its limitations, and entertain alternatives. But for Professor Fish, this sense of transcendence is largely an illusion. He pretends it could be achieved only "if the moment of self-reflection is in no way dependent on that from which it is to set us free" (i.e., our "deeply assumed norms and standards"). "Reflection," he concludes, is "just a fancy word for persuasion." But why should we insist that reflection, in order to be effective, in order to be liberating, must be utterly free from the "norms and standards" out of which it arises? Does not the simple fact of our being able to entertain a point of view very different from our own show that we can meaningfully transcend our taken-for-granted interpretive schemes?

Like many of his colleagues who are impatient with concepts like objectivity and disinterestedness, Professor Fish tends to prosecute his anti-traditional case by caricaturing the opposition. A basic tactic is to postulate a kind of super-Cartesian whose view of what counts as knowledge is so stringent that it is inevitably defeated and whose defeat is then chalked up as a victory for the notion of "interpretive communities." Thus, Professor Fish assures us that for anyone who believes in objectivity,

> [t]he trick . . . is to think of sentences that would be heard in the same way by all competent speakers no matter what their educational experience, or class membership, or partisan affiliation, or special knowledge, sentences which, invariant across contexts, could form the basis of an acontextual and formal description of the language and its rules.

But who believes such sentences exist, outside the precincts of pure mathematics? And who believes that we need such a rigorous view of language in order to make sense of, say, impartial judgment? Just as Professor Fish's reader of *Paradise Lost* was a dim chap whose primary virtue was to bring glory to the "reader response" view of literary criticism, so those who dispute his skeptical notion of interpretive authority are held to be a crude lot who have never suspected that knowledge is a fallible thing.

One of Professor Fish's neatest rhetorical gambits is to assure us that his radical view of meaning and interpretation is benign. Are you worried about making decisions on the basis of merit, not prejudice? Don't worry: because all judgments are prejudiced, decisions that claim to be based on merit are just as prejudiced as any others, only they are less self-conscious, since they fail to recognize their own prejudices. Are you concerned about preserving the ideal of disinterested scholarship? Forget about it: "disinterestedness" is a chimera; and what is impossible or illusory can't very well be preserved. Professor Fish's favorite method of introducing such charming sophisms is by bluntly denying the obvious. "There is no such thing as . . ."—you name it: truth, merit, justice, facts. For example:

> there is no such thing as literal meaning . . . (Page 4)

> there can be no such thing as theory . . . (Page 14)

> there is no such thing as intrinsic merit . . . (Page 164)

> Indeed, there is no such thing as a "mere preference" in the sense that makes it a threat to communal norms, for anything that could be experienced as a preference will derive from the norms inherent in some community. (Page 11)

Let us allow the first three of these pronouncements to stand as what they primarily are: verbal provocations, without (since we have just been assured that there

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is no such thing) literal meaning or intrinsic merit. But do let us pause to consider some of the implications of Professor Fish's dismissal of anything so scandalous as "mere" preference and his assurance that nothing "that could be experienced as a preference" can be "a threat to communal norms." First, note that he is not just making the point that our desires and preferences have a social component, that what we want is to some extent the product of the community we happen to find ourselves in. On the contrary, he believes that socialization—to borrow a phrase from the philosopher Richard Rorty—"goes all the way down." Like Rorty, Professor Fish maintains that there are no independent criteria to which we might appeal to justify, or to condemn, our beliefs or actions. Indeed, he is fond of declaring that phrases like "independent criteria" and "disinterested judgment" are self-contradictory.

Yet, as is often the case in these essays, part of Professor Fish's purpose in denying the obvious is to sweeten his message, to reassure us that his view of language and meaning entails no important loss. If there are no such things as intrinsic merit or disinterested judgment to begin with, then we need hardly worry about their corruption or loss. Of course, most of us have been taught the opposite. We believe, for example, that there *is* a difference between action based on "mere preference" and action based on principle, between acting in a way that is self-interested and acting for the sake of something greater than self-interest. We believe that there is such a thing as unprincipled behavior, based on "mere preference," and that such behavior can be dangerous. Professor Fish is in effect telling us that we are being too fastidious. Since, in his view, every decision and every action is inexpungably colored by undeclared interests, the effort to distinguish between preference and principle is otiose. Moreover, because all values, preferences, facts, desires, and principles are themselves products of some "interpretive community," "'mere' preference" cannot be a "threat to communal norms." Professor Fish's slogan for this happy state of affairs is that "all preferences are principled."

But think about it. Last spring, a gang of adolescent boys raped and brutally beat a woman in Central Park, leaving her for dead. The extreme youth of the attackers and the ghastly savageness of their crime assured that the case made national headlines. When asked why he had repeatedly beat the helpless woman about the head with a metal pipe, one of the boys is reported to have replied: "Because it was fun." In other words, there was no particular reason. It was a whim. He just felt like doing it. Not to worry, though: Professor Fish has informed us that since preferences always "derive from the norms inherent in some community," they cannot be a "threat to communal norms." Is it mere prejudice, then, that leads us to condemn this act? Would another point of view, one that sanctioned rape and brutality, be equally legitimate and morally compelling because it, too, derived from norms inherent in some interpretive community? Is Hitler to be exonerated because, after all, his preferences derived from the norms that prevailed in *his* interpretive community?

Looming behind all Professor Fish's startling denials and rhetorical antics is a single large claim about the nature of truth. In brief, there isn't any. That is to say, there isn't any if one insists that truth requires independent criteria, that there must be external checks or constraints on meaning and interpretation. In Professor Fish's terms, this insistence is "formalist" or "foundationalist." He defines foundationalism as "any attempt to ground inquiry and communication in something more firm and stable than mere belief or unexamined practice." It follows that we are guilty of being foundationalist if we believe there are criteria or "constraints" on judgment independent of our particular situation.

Foundationalism is Professor Fish's *bête noire*. Again and again in these essays he assures us that "there are no higher or more general constraints, only constraints that are

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different, constraints built into practices other than the one whose reform is now being contemplated." In this sense, Professor Fish is not your garden-variety relativist; he is a relativist of a more sophisticated stripe. He recognizes that in order to make sense of judgment at all one has to appeal to something like criteria. It's just that he doesn't believe that criteria ever possess the independence traditionally imputed to them. Hence he insists there are "no constraints that are more than the content of a practice from which they are indistinguishable"; "whatever is invoked as a constraint on interpretation will turn out upon further examination to have been the product of interpretation." Hence, too, the frankly political aspect of his view of meaning: "It is first and last," he writes in his introduction, "a question of *power* in relation to the putting in place of *constraints*."

This set of ideas has been dawning on Professor Fish for years, and has now assumed the proportions of an *idée fixe*. It is indeed the lodestar around which all his critical work currently circles. As he notes in the preface to *Doing What Comes Naturally*, the essays therein collected, though ostensibly on diverse topics, are really "the same." All develop or defend or explain this one idea about the nature of truth and meaning. Not surprisingly, Professor Fish's preferred term for his outlook is "anti-foundationalism." He himself, he assures us, is a "card-carrying anti-foundationalist," and he thinks we should be, too. Not that he wants for company. While he is more rigorous in his exposition than most of his literary colleagues, Professor Fish is hardly alone in his anti-foundationalist sympathies. In some version or other, the anti-foundationalist creed has installed itself as the reigning ideology throughout the humanities. It is, to take just one example, anti-foundationalist fervor that stands behind Richard Rorty's endorsement of a "postmetaphysical" and "postreligious" culture in which "the sermon and treatise" would be replaced by "the novel, the movie, and the TV program" as the "principal vehicles of moral change and progress."[4] And in case there were any doubts on this score, be assured that, like Professor Fish, this MacArthur Fellow and Professor of Humanities at the University of Virginia presents his vision of anti-foundationalist triumph as a *desirable* eventuality.

In this context, it may be worth noting that one of the things Professor Fish is proudest of is the unusually wide range of his enemies. He is fond of reminding one that he is attacked as often by the Left as by the Right. The academic Left is unhappy with him because he is impatient with their claims for "theory"—what he aptly calls "theory talk" or "theory hope." In accordance with the principle of knowing how far to go in going too far, Professor Fish outflanks his radical brethren, claiming that they aren't quite radical enough. They may have plowed through volumes of Derrida and Althusser and Habermas, to say nothing of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger; they may rail against the logocentric hegemony of an elitest patriarchal faith in objectivity and science—but what good does it do them? In the midst of their orgies of disillusionment and skepticism, there is one belief they never abandon: the belief in theory itself. That is to say, they always assume that their current pet theory provides a critical purchase on language or the world that is somehow truer, better, more accurate than that enjoyed by their benighted neighbor. Accordingly, Professor Fish charges that even "anti-foundationalist" theory (and is there any other kind in the academy?) is covertly . . . yes, *foundationalist*. And that, clearly, is not a charge calculated to win one friends in the humanities departments of our universities.

The academic Right, on the other hand, is unhappy with Professor Fish primarily because he is a relativist who believes that "political justifications are the only kind there are" and because he consequently

4 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*; Cambridge University Press, 1989, pages xiii-xvi.

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denies that traditional ideals like truth or justice—to say nothing of our old friends "intrinsic merit," "disinterestedness," and "objectivity"—have any meaning except as rhetorical gestures. Yet it would be a grave error to suppose that Professor Fish plies a middle road between the intellectual Left and the Right. Both the Right and the Left have misunderstood him, he complains, but it is clear that he regards some misunderstandings as more equal than others. He criticizes the naïveté of his leftist colleagues and attracts their ire (a certain species of feminist seems to be especially exercised by his writings). But as a "card-carrying anti-foundationalist" his political sympathies—and remember, for Professor Fish there are no other kind—are all with them.

If this were not already clear enough from his anti-foundationalist ideas about meaning, truth, and interpretation, it becomes pellucidly clear whenever he steps out of his preferred role as radical epistemological proselytizer and discusses concrete issues of policy. Consider, for example, the very different ways he characterizes two articles by fellow academics in "Profession Despise Thyself: Fear and Self-Loathing in Literary Studies." The primary occasion for this lecture on the virtues of professionalism was a 1982 article by the eminent Harvard literary scholar Walter Jackson Bate decrying the new faddishness and politicization that were erupting in English departments around the country. Naturally, Professor Fish has little patience with Bate's criticism. But it is instructive to compare his attack on Bate's piece with his treatment of another attack on the academy that appeared in 1982: this one by Columbia University's redoubtable PLO sympathizer and professor of comparative literature, Edward Said. No one acquainted with the work of Bate and Said will be surprised to learn that where Bate criticized the profession for abandoning standards, Said criticized it for being overly narrow and not sufficiently political. After spending several pages excoriating Bate for his small-mindedness, Professor Fish turns, reluctantly, to criticize Said. Said must be criticized because he thinks something is wrong with the profession of English being professional. But Professor Fish is careful to describe Said's piece as "infinitely more attractive" than Bate's, claiming that it is "everything that Bate's is not: generous, learned, humane, compassionate, responsible." Again, anyone familiar with the work of these authors will recognize that Professor Fish's characterization is preposterous. It appears, though, that one tangible advantage of doing what comes naturally is that it relieves one of the chore of even attempting to be evenhanded.

The development of Professor Fish's anti-foundationalist campaign also explains a good deal about the direction his own work has taken. It explains, for example, why he has increasingly abandoned literary criticism for the study of rhetoric. Already in *Is There a Text in This Class?*, he concludes that

> the business of criticism was not (as I had previously thought) to determine a correct way of reading but to determine from which of a number of possible perspectives reading will proceed. . . . The business of criticism, in other words, was not to decide between interpretations by subjecting them to the test of disinterested evidence but to establish by political and persuasive means (they are the same thing) the set of interpretive assumptions from the vantage of which the evidence (and the facts and the intentions and everything else) will hereafter be specifiable.

Given this interest in the art of persuasion—that is to say, in rhetoric—it is no wonder that Professor Fish should have increasingly turned away from literature and toward legal texts to provide fodder for his theories. At least since Plato, as the *Phaedrus* reminds us, rhetoric has been understood as having to do principally with "lawsuits . . . and of course public harangues also."

In broad outline, Professor Fish's position is nothing new. Similar presuppositions about language can be found in certain strains of American pragmatism as well as in Ludwig Wittgenstein's late philosophy of

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language, especially in his theory of language games. And as Professor Fish proudly acknowledges, the spirit and intellectual pedigree of his anti-foundationalist views hark back to the sophists of Plato's time. Like them, he argues that "man is measure of all things," that "justice" "means nothing but what is to the interest of the stronger party," etc. Here is Professor Fish's own version of Thrasymachus's claim: "Does might make right? In a sense the answer I must give is yes, since in the absence of a perspective independent of interpretation some interpretive perspective will always rule by virtue of having won out over its competitors." In other words, Professor Fish would have us believe that whatever interpretive scheme "wins out" is not only victorious but therefore *right*.

No, for all its professional cachet and shock value, Professor Fish's position is far from convincing. For one thing, as with the sophists before him, there is an insurmountable contradiction at the heart of the Fish course on meaning. It is this: he cannot claim truth for his own theory without denying the relativistic principles upon which it is based. He rightly points out that the various aspects of his anti-foundationalist creed are closely connected, noting that the "first step down the anti-formalist road," the denial of literal meaning, "contains all the others." But how are we to understand that denial? Is it . . . true? Or is it merely an interpretive gesture? As with every thoroughgoing relativist since Protagoras, Professor Fish must eventually face the problem of not being able to assert his own position without self-contradiction. And indeed this central contradiction works as a solvent on the whole idea of interpretive communities as Professor Fish develops it. He hastily assures us that this is an objection that is "easily gotten around." But is his response convincing? Does it help to say, as he does, that, yes, there is a foundation for his relativistic position, but it is only "rhetorical," based on evidence that is "cultural and contextual"?

Professor Fish's anti-foundationalist view of language and interpretation is most egregiously deficient when it comes to science and the idea of objective truth. The insistence that all our notions of truth are products of particular interpretive communities does not go very far in accounting for the cogency of scientific discourse, or, in fact, for the everyday notion of empirical truth. *Pace* Professor Fish, the fact remains that science offers us not just another description of reality but, in a way that can be precisely specified, a more objective description of reality than that offered by ordinary language. Is the concept of objectivity itself the product of a particular culture and assumptions about the nature of truth? Of course it is. But the fact that all our concepts and theories have a history does not by itself gainsay their truth or validity. Nor does the fact that the idea of objectivity happened to arise out of a particular interpretive community mean that its application is limited to that community. The very power science has given us to manipulate and control reality shows that its truths, though reductive, are genuinely universal.

Like virtually every other English professor eager to debunk the authority of science and objectivity, Professor Fish quotes abundantly from Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, somehow under the impression that this much misused book abets the project of collapsing science into a form of literary chitchat. But for all his talk of "paradigm change" and recognition that science, too, inevitably works with theories that themselves unfold in particular cultural circumstances, Kuhn is far from the freewheeling relativist that professors of English have turned him into. He is careful to insist, for example, that "later scientific theories are better than earlier ones for solving puzzles in the often quite different environments to which they are applied." As Kuhn himself comments: "That is not a relativist's position, and it displays the sense in which I am a convinced believer in scientific progress." These are not statements calculated to console the anti-foundationalist faithful. The simple fact of

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scientific progress—relying as it does on there being some descriptions of phenomena that are demonstrably more objective than others—effectively undercuts the anti-foundationalist ambition to disenfranchise the notion of truth and transform facts into a form of exotic political capital generated by "interpretive communities."

It is important to emphasize that the implications of Professor Fish's anti-foundationalist fantasies are not confined to abstract matters of epistemology. As he himself acknowledges early on in *Doing What Comes Naturally*, the implications of the anti-formalist, anti-foundationalist creed are "almost boundless." We have seen, however, that notwithstanding this admission he is also everywhere at pains to assure his readers that "when you get to the end of the anti-formalist road nothing will have changed except the answers you might give to some traditional questions in philosophy and literary theory." "[T]he dangers of excessive interpretive freedom, of 'masked power,' of random or irresponsible activity," he writes, "are unrealizable, because the conditions that would make them the basis of a reasonable fear—the condition of free subjectivity, of 'naturally' indeterminate texts, or unprincipled authority—could never obtain." Once again, we find there is nothing to worry about: "nihilism is impossible" and of course "it is unnecessary to combat something that is not possible."

But in fact there is a great deal to worry about. For not only is the anti-foundationalist creed wrong, it is—as Professor Fish has been eager to declare—subversive. Indeed, he notes in passing that the entire tenor of anti-foundationalism is against "a general assumption of liberal thought," namely, the ideal of disinterested knowledge. And this brings us back to that "master-word" of these essays: rhetoric. What we see at work throughout this book is a deliberate attempt to supplant reason by rhetoric, truth by persuasion. This would be troubling enough if it were confined to literary texts; extended to legal texts and basic political concepts like justice, it is nothing short of disastrous. There was a time when one studied rhetoric in order to employ its resources effectively for the sake of truth and justice and to inoculate oneself against its charms. For Professor Fish, however, rhetoric is all there is. This has always been the position of professional rhetoricians, from the time of sophists like Thrasymachus, Callicles, and Protagoras, down to contemporary sophists like Rorty and Fish. Plato condemned rhetoric as a "shadow play of words" that was concerned with semblance, not reality. Does it help to be told that Plato's qualms are groundless because there is no such thing as reality or facts or literal meaning or truth? (Given the large material triumphs of Professor Fish & Co. at Duke, one cannot help recalling that Plato also remarked on the "astounding" amounts of money that sophists make.)

Surely one of the clearest symptoms of the decadence and politicization afflicting academic literary studies today is the extent to which elementary distinctions of taste and value have been corrupted, willfully misunderstood, or simply ignored. We know something is gravely amiss when teachers of the humanities confess—or, as is more often the case, when they boast—that they are no longer able to distinguish between truth and falsehood, between reality and rhetoric. We know something is wrong when scholars assure us—and their pupils—that there is no essential difference between the disinterested pursuit of knowledge and partisan proselytizing, and when academic literary critics abandon the effort to identify and elucidate works of lasting achievement as a reactionary enterprise unworthy of their calling. By the time he published *Is There a Text in This Class?* in 1980, Stanley Fish was already far down the anti-formalist, anti-foundationalist road. Like most errors, this one did not improve with time. Regarding his new book, with its updated litanies, one can hardly do better than quote one of his own condemnations: Still wrong after all these years.

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Frankenthaler and her critics

by Karen Wilkin

"Helen Frankenthaler: A Paintings Retrospective,"[1] at the Museum of Modern Art this summer, was an *event*, heralded by ample color spreads in the glossy magazines and a cover story in *The New York Times Magazine*. There were interviews in *Lear's*, in *New York Woman*, on the *Today* show, and in the new British art magazine *Modern Painters*. The show was thoroughly dissected by the New York papers, the art magazines, and the out-of-town press. Frankenthaler was declared—with the cautious proviso "since the deaths of Georgia O'Keeffe and Louise Nevelson"—to be "the country's most prominent female artist." (Since Frankenthaler was born a good thirty years after either of her long-lived predecessors, the accolade could even be interpreted as a tribute to her work rather than to her endurance.)

Clearly Frankenthaler is news, and for those of us who believe that she is not only "the country's most prominent female artist" but one of the best painters around, anywhere, period, the ballyhoo surrounding the show seemed appropriate. Quite apart from anything else, the show was the first in New York devoted to an overview of Frankenthaler's canvases since the Whitney Museum's retrospective in 1969. (In between, however, there have been, among other shows, a splendid survey of her work of the 1950s at the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, a travelling print retrospective, and "Frankenthaler on Paper: 1949-1984," at the Guggenheim Museum and across the country.) The show at MOMA, restricted to forty paintings, was evidently not a complete examination of the career of an artist who is an accomplished printmaker as well as a painter, who has designed ballet costumes and book covers and made ceramic murals and sculpture in steel and bronze; the peculiar wording "a paintings retrospective" was apparently intended to call attention to this deliberate limitation. Nonetheless, it was an opportunity to see a substantial number of Frankenthalers from 1952 to 1988, an exciting prospect for anyone who cares about twentieth-century American art.

Whatever one's reservations about the decision to limit the show to forty works or one's quibbles about particular selections and omissions, the exhibition was provocative, stimulating, and afforded great pleasure. It was possible to see just how Frankenthaler's work at any given period both exemplifies the characteristics of its time and stands a bit apart. Beginning with the deservedly famous *Mountains and Sea* (1952, collection of the artist, on extended

1 "Helen Frankenthaler: A Paintings Retrospective," organized by E. A. Carmean, Jr., was on view at the Museum of Modern Art in New York from June 5 through August 20. It will travel to the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth (November 5 to January 7), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (February 8 to March 22, 1990), and the Detroit Institute of Arts (June 11 to September 2, 1990).

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loan to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), the luminous quasi-landscape that has been claimed as the Ur-text of stain painting, it was possible to chart how Frankenthaler's paintings share the emotional nakedness of their Abstract Expressionist ancestors but back off from heroic posturings and cosmic rhetoric. Frankenthaler's world is all ambiguity, all elusive suggestion; unstable spaces are momentarily indicated, then become unequivocal expanses of thin paint in and on canvas. In the Fifties paintings, images lurk at the edges of peripheral vision, then slip away, like dream characters that are immediately identifiable while you sleep but wholly mysterious once you awake. Frankenthaler's pictures of the late 1960s and 1970s are more austere, more about floods of color that seem magically to have found their own shapes while bearing witness to the presence of a distinctive personality at work. These pictures have some of the stripped down "cool" of the period, but they are more improvisatory and often more allusive than the work of her contemporaries. The show's insistence on its not being a true retrospective meant that there were gaps and elisions in the chronological flow; a single picture was made to stand for a group of related explorations of a theme. But while this staccato selection could be frustrating, it also served to emphasize something basic to Frankenthaler. Unlike many of her contemporaries, she has never worked in series. There are family likenesses between groups of pictures, but each one is newly conceived, freshly invented.

The more recent work in the exhibition asserted that Frankenthaler, not surprisingly, has remained Frankenthaler, still capable of eliciting maximum drama from the struggle between, say, two critically shaped clumps of pigment and a frayed-off swipe between them. (She's also still capable of the audacious, overscaled drawing typical of her Fifties pictures, but you'd never know it from the selection at MOMA.) At the same time, Frankenthaler seems very much of the present in the increasing materiality of her paintings of the past decade or so. She is no less adept at suggesting infinite space and radiant light than she was in her earlier work, but she makes us acutely aware of her means, the substances with which she constructs her slightly irrational but harmonious pictures. Part of the originality of Frankenthaler's Fifties work lay in its apparent denial of materiality; her technique of staining thin color into unprimed canvas made color almost independent of surface. Thirty years later, she is reveling in the expressive possibilities of surface inflection and density.

The cumulative effect of the show was of prodigious inventiveness. Frankenthaler doesn't have a single way of making a picture, nor despite the exhibition's weighting toward the lyrical does she have a single emotional temperature. If there was a constant visible, it was her unmistakable use of color, from the transparent pastels and murky darks of the Fifties to the saturated intensities of the Sixties and Seventies, and the "Old Master" chiaroscuro of recent work—with numerous variations on the way. Frankenthaler has been challenging herself all along, refusing to settle for what she knows she can do, remaining alert to the implications of pictures that, as she says, contain "wrong things that make it right." Expanding on the idea, she says: "Instead of masterly, you want to be—well, two words I frequently use—*clumsy* or puzzled."

Whatever the limitations of "A Paintings Retrospective," it re-asserted that Frankenthaler is a complex artist, to be taken very seriously. Oddly, the critical response to the show often seemed to have less to do with the exhibition than with attitudes toward the abstraction of the 1950s and 1960s and toward what is modish at present. The show seemed to draw once again the boundaries between those who are faithful to notions of high culture, excellence, and art's ability to stir deeply and those who have adopted a more fashionable ironic (or cynical) attitude of detachment. Among the former, John Russell, in *The New York Times*, was admiring and enthusiastic; Amei Wallach, in

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New York Newsday, writing more about the artist than the exhibit, was empathetic if a little breathless; and Hilton Kramer, in *The New York Observer*, was perceptive and reasonable. A surprisingly good article by Carter Ratcliff appeared, in all places, in *Vogue*. Elsewhere, Frankenthaler was praised for having remained faithful to abstraction (by implication, retardataire abstraction), as though there were something remarkable in a serious artist's being impervious to the lure of trend. The *Orlando* [Florida] *Sentinel*, for example, wrote: "The Beach Boys' tune 'Be True to Your School' might be Helen Frankenthaler's unofficial anthem. As pop, op, minimal and neo-whatever artists trod on abstract expressionism's grave, the undaunted Frankenthaler continued to turn out powerful canvases loyal to the genre's ideals, in the process spearheading the 'color field' movement." Even the sympathetic, if slightly barbed, cover story by Deborah Solomon in the *Times Magazine* suggested that Frankenthaler's preoccupations were less than current: "By remaining loyal to the orthodoxies of the 1950s, she has more or less alienated herself from the generation of painters who have come of age since the days when art was a heroic metaphysical quest."

The most frequent complaint about Frankenthaler's work was that it is too lyrical, too beautiful. Many writers wished to prove their hipness by refusing to be seduced by Frankenthaler's pictures, although such a professional hipster and tough guy as *Newsweek*'s Peter Plagens succumbed. After noting that a retrospective "reveals both the achievements and the limitations of an artist and in Frankenthaler's case they are the same: the preeminence of taste," Plagens concluded: "several roomsful of Frankenthaler's lush and joyful paintings serve to remind us that there's considerable virtue in art conjured from the glories of light, space and natural talent." Even Jack Bankowsky, in the notoriously high-minded *Artforum*, was won over: he described Frankenthaler's Fifties work as "lyrical evocations of sea and sand," adding that they "may have seemed less substantial than the dark broodings of the top-shelf expressionists, but they have proved extremely durable." Yet the questions itemized in the *Times Magazine* article remain implicit in much of what was written about the exhibition: "Does abstraction have any meaning today? Is it possible to be preoccupied with formalist problems—problems of surface, dimension, edge and color—without being obsolete? Does beauty count for anything?" (I would very much like to know how anyone but the most rarefied conceptual artist can avoid being preoccupied, to some degree, with problems of surface, dimension, edge, and color. On second thought, I've seen too many recent exhibitions where, alas, these were clearly not issues.)

Frankenthaler's published comments admittedly set her up for this kind of questioning. The text of the catalogue of the exhibition mainly consists of statements about specific works that the curator, E. A. Carmean, Jr., of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, extracted from her over a long period.[2] (Often, I suspect, what appears in the printed text is the last thing Frankenthaler was willing to say about a work, not what she deemed most important or interesting.) In the catalogue and in interviews she keeps using a word much despised in these ironic postmodernist times: "beauty." "One's prominence depends on the beauty of the picture," she has said. And: "What I hope to remain concerned with is the picture plane and whether or not I can make a beautiful painting." Of course, what Frankenthaler means by beauty is not what her detractors claim. "Beauty doesn't have to mean gorgeousness," she told a *Newsweek* interviewer. "The way I mean it, beauty is what works, it moves one, it's undeniable." I imagine that her definition would correspond to G. H. Hardy's description of greatness in his discipline, mathematics: "There is a very high degree of *unexpectedness* combined with *inevitability* and *economy*."

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2 The catalogue, entitled *Helen Frankenthaler: A Paintings Retrospective*, was written by E. A. Carmean, Jr., and published by Abrams (192 pages, $35).

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Often the articles about Frankenthaler and her exhibition made much of the artist's grande-dame manner, her elegance, her perfectionism, sometimes implying that these were somehow not quite acceptable; I suppose Louise Nevelson's baseball jackets or Georgia O'Keeffe's Olympian retreat to New Mexico made their theatrical posturing more palatable. Writers seemed respectful of Frankenthaler's wholehearted commitment to her work, but there was little about her more engaging side—her loyalty and generosity as a friend, her appetite for good art that challenges her, her acute eye, her ability to be silly and entertaining—and there was often implicit criticism of her comfortably ordered life. Deborah Solomon's prickly *Times Magazine* article was noticeably different from the unbearably accepting, uncritical piece on Francis Bacon by Michael Kimmelman that appeared a month or so later.

Most of what was said by Frankenthaler's critics was utterly predictable: the familiar litany of her privileged New York childhood; her studies at Bennington College and, briefly, with Hans Hofmann; the even more familiar legend of her introduction to New York's most innovative artists of the Fifties through her liaison with Clement Greenberg; her exhibitions while in her early twenties; and all the rest of it. There's usually some snide innuendo at this point suggesting that the principal reason anyone paid attention to the young Frankenthaler was that she belonged to an art-world rat pack or that her work was completely directed by a Svengalian Greenberg, this despite the fact that neither the events of the period nor the evolution of the artist's work—both discussed most illuminatingly by John Elderfield in his recent book on Frankenthaler[3]—bear out these contentions.

I suspect that the persistence of these ideas owes more to current cynicism about how today's art world functions than to real information. What is unquestionable is that the early Fifties were a heady time to be a young, pretty woman striving to make art in New York, especially if she had the benefit of an informed outsider, arguably the most perceptive critic of the period, as a guide. The city's art community was a smaller, more cohesive place in those days, not yet split into Pollock vs. de Kooning vs. Rothko factions. (A position on the Stalinist purges could still make people cross the street in order to avoid one another, but that's another matter.) Frankenthaler looked at everything—hard—and drew her own conclusions. The more aware among Frankenthaler's commentators point out that she quickly realized, as she once put it, that "you could become a de Kooning disciple or satellite or mirror, but you could *depart* from Pollock." This usually leads to the most celebrated story in the Frankenthaler corpus, the one about her making *Mountains and Sea*, soaking its transparent, intense colors into raw canvas, and working abstractly, although with the memory of a recent trip to Nova Scotia, as she said, "in my arms." Aged twenty-three. It's the picture Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis, young visitors from Washington, saw when Greenberg let them into Frankenthaler's studio, in her absence, one weekend in 1953, the one that provoked Louis's frequently quoted description of Frankenthaler as "the bridge between Pollock and what is possible." (Frankenthaler must be sick to death of that anecdote by now.)

Since *Mountains and Sea* begins "A Paintings Retrospective" and since it remains fresh, vigorous, and delicious, it's not surprising that so much space has been devoted to the lore surrounding the picture. In light of the subsequent technical development of Frankenthaler's work and of Noland's and Louis's—which was not the instantaneous reaction to *Mountains and Sea* we are often told about—it's not surprising that so much has been written about the stain method. Nonetheless, to think of Frankenthaler principally as a transitional artist or as the inventor of a technique is to diminish her and to miss the point.

3 *Frankenthaler*, by John Elderfield; Abrams, 448 pages, $150.

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The most peculiar response to *Mountains and Sea* can be described as a kind of knee jerk: since the painting can be said to prefigure or in some way to have provoked the kind of abstraction saddled with the unfortunate name "color-field," and since it is de rigueur for present-day serious writers to show their perceptiveness by rejecting abstraction in general and color-field abstraction in particular (unless it is reincarnated in a neo-ironic vein), it must follow that *Mountains and Sea* and possibly Frankenthaler weren't all that good in the first place.

The most egregious example of the knee jerk was Peter Schjeldahl's venomous review in *7 Days*. Schjeldahl allows that Frankenthaler was "a very good painter for a while—now and then in the late '50s . . . and solidly in the early '60s," praising a few pictures for "rhythmical lollops of intense color as fresh as cold water and hanging together with the vernacular rightness of great jazz." (One of the pictures he singles out, *Seascape with Dunes* [1962, Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University Art Collection], is, to my eye, one of the sleekest and atypically calculated-looking in the show.) But Schjeldahl's position is clear. His opening sentence describes Frankenthaler as "the doyenne of color-field painting (an over-blown, undernourished styloid of the 1960s)." He then goes on to explain, at length, that color-field painting was "invented by Clement Greenberg in 1953 when he showed a stain painting by Frankenthaler—a delicate mess of a picture called *Mountains and Sea* . . .—to Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, a couple of striving provincials from Washington, D.C." Unlike most of his colleagues, Schjeldahl finds Frankenthaler's color unappealing: "her paintings aren't only not beautiful, they aren't even pretty. This is an achievement of sorts, given Frankenthaler's lush palette, but I wouldn't call it a wonderful achievement." He attributes the decline that he perceives in Frankenthaler's work to her switching from oils to acrylics in the 1970s and to her working large, since he prefers her works on paper. (Among other infelicities in Schjeldahl's prose is his apparent belief that "lapidary" means "suitable to small size.") Schjeldahl complains, too, of Frankenthaler's personal manner and her published statements. He accuses her of "overconfidence" and objects to "her style of personal hauteur." It may be that Frankenthaler has been less than agreeable to Schjeldahl, but given his opinion of her work, who can blame her?

The most vitriolic review was probably Kay Larson's in *New York* magazine. She can tolerate the paintings of the 1950s, possibly because she can find images in them that correspond to words in the titles, which she takes very literally. Larson concludes that *Mountains and Sea* is the best painting in the show, even though she, too, blames it for the advent of color-field painting. Magnanimously, she says, "So what? It's a fine painting but even it has lost some of its electrical charge." Larson describes the exhibition as "the season's most irrelevant," a curious category, at best. I kept wondering just how relevant Picasso's and Braque's still lives or Matisse's miraculous view of Notre Dame of 1914—at MOMA—were to the economic and social crises that led to the outbreak of World War I that year. Or does Larson mean aesthetically relevant? Her assumption that all living artists should work in an approved up-to-the-minute manner is just plain frightening. A fair amount of Larson's irritation seems to have little to do with aesthetics, however. Frankenthaler, she says, "last had an impact on contemporary ideas three decades ago, but her defenders are still lodged in the academies and the provinces. Witness the genealogy of this show, which was organized for the Modern Art Museum of Ft. Worth by E. A. Carmean, Jr." Larson clearly is not impressed with Carmean's background—former curator of twentieth-century art at the National Gallery, Washington—although that may be the provinces, by her definition. By the same logic, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, must be an academy, since its director of drawings, John Elderfield, is the author of the insightful monograph on Frankenthaler recently published by Harry N. Abrams.

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Larson is typical of many of Frankenthaler's detractors in her slightly unwilling admiration of some of the Fifties pictures. Their elusive images, the calligraphic birds in *Swan Lake I* (1961, private collection), or the fox in *Winter Hunt* (1958, Los Angeles County Museum of Art)—the spontaneously "discovered" configurations that generated the pictures' titles—reassure those uncomfortable with abstraction and suggest that there might be more to Frankenthaler's work than they thought. Carmean's picture-by-picture entries in the exhibition's catalogue reinforce this tendency, since he interrogated Frankenthaler about each work, about her recollections of making it, titling it, and her state of mind at the time; the result shifts emphasis toward the relation between implied image and whatever words Frankenthaler chose to attach to the picture. (She is so exasperated by the over-literal interpretations the show has set loose that she is thinking about numbering her current work instead of titling it.)

But what Frankenthaler's pictures look like often seems secondary to her commentators. Larson: "There are reasons to tread cautiously through this exhibition, and the gravest are political. Frankenthaler became identified with Greenberg, whom she met in 1950 and whose personality and politics are entangled in the arguments that justify Color Field." Schjeldahl, however, admits: "Never an orthodox Greenbergian, Frankenthaler can't be blamed for the derivative inanities of color field." Robert Hughes, in *Time*, after itemizing what he found to be Frankenthaler's strengths and weaknesses, skirted the issue neatly: "Yet it would be a pity, all the same, if the present decade's recoil from the inflated historical claims made for color-field painting stopped one from enjoying the show."

Whatever one thinks of color-field abstraction (with capitals or without, hyphenated or not), it should be evident to anyone who paid attention to Frankenthaler's paintings that her work was always manifestly different from that of Noland or Louis or Olitski or even Stella (in the Sixties and early Seventies), all of which she is supposed to have provoked by painting *Mountains and Sea*. Frankenthaler has never deduced her compositions from the given shape of the canvas, never worked in identifiable series, never sought to exclude the mark of her hand, never created shapes with geometrically precise edges. Then, too, she has always emphasized the importance of her early assimilation of Cubist ideas of structure. She describes herself as a "spacemaker" who uses color and placement to pry implied planes apart, not to reassert the surface of the canvas in the way color-field painting is assumed to do. (These are simply facts borne out by the evidence of the pictures, not value judgments.)

It's more fruitful to compare Frankenthaler's work with David Smith's, despite the difference in their ages and their chosen media. Frankenthaler met the sculptor in 1950, through Greenberg, and they remained close friends, frequenting each other's studios, until Smith's death in 1965. After Frankenthaler married Robert Motherwell in 1958, the two men became close as well. (The complex relationship between the work of all three artists has yet to be fully unraveled.) When he and Frankenthaler met, Smith had behind him a body of work based on recurring associative forms "displayed" on inventive structures. In 1950, he had begun making large-scale, essentially abstract sculptures that were as expressive and loaded with meaning as the small "glyphs" of his earlier work. The sense of animated, confronting *presence* remained a constant, whether he was making hieratic, figure-like vertical pieces or unexpected wagon- or weapon-like constructions. The ambiguous, loaded images of Frankenthaler's work of the Fifties, which coalesce momentarily out of their existence as "pure" painting, seem related to the imprecise, suggestive imagery of Smith's work. Like Smith, too, Frankenthaler abandoned relatively specific images in favor of larger-scaled, more abstract ones, but she, too,

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always retained a vigorous, animated quality in even her most severe and apparently non-referential pictures. There are larger correspondences as well: their mutual grounding in Cubism, their insistence on touch. Smith's best sculptures, no matter how they revel in the materials and the methods of the factory, reverberate with a sense of the hand; Frankenthaler, too, stresses what she calls her "wrist," her individual, unmistakable handwriting.

But it's the hidden and not so hidden images in Frankenthaler's paintings of the 1950s that seem to inspire the most commentary these days. John Elderfield brings up the notion, first proposed in the 1960s, that the three large parallel masses in *Mother Goose Melody* (1959, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts) might refer to Frankenthaler and her two older sisters, watched over by the spattery, spiraling "Mother Goose" figure on the right. *Eden* (1956, private collection), with its sunburst, its "trees," and its red handprint, has elicited all kinds of interpretation, probably as much because of its title as itself. Robert Hughes, for example, wonders if the hand isn't "of God." Frankenthaler's works on paper of the Fifties and Sixties are full of hand- and fingerprints, even a footprint or two, as though the young painter were literally stamping her work with her presence; I have the sense that she printed *Eden* with the shape of her own hand out of sheer exuberance and pride of authorship, just as she declared herself by scrawling "Helen" across the center of a large colored drawing made in 1951, but others seem determined to make more out of it. This is not to say that the images in Frankenthaler's early pictures are not there or that they are not richly associative, but they do resist precise interpretation; Frankenthaler is neither a symbolist nor a narrative painter.

The presence of these not quite identifiable images in Frankenthaler's early paintings seems to have perplexed Arthur C. Danto, in *The Nation*, more than any of Frankenthaler's other commentators. Danto has looked hard at Frankenthaler's pictures. He's not afraid of using the word beauty and he is a passionate admirer of some of her work. He describes *Mountains and Sea*, for example, as "distantly Cubist, but feminized, without harsh angles, aggressive edges and dangerous vertices." He goes on to say that "there are passages in it I cannot see too frequently," describing one of them as "as beautiful as painting gets." Of the cumulative effect of the exhibition, he writes: "a visual narrative of Frankenthaler's artistic life unfolds through work after work of the same order of beauty as *Mountains and Sea* but more confident, less diffident and increasingly tasteful."

Danto is quick to point out that "as a matter of biography, *Mountains and Sea* was inspired by a trip to Nova Scotia, but it could as easily be seen as a still life rather than a landscape or not read referentially at all." Yet he still seems fascinated by the passages in other works of the Fifties that, he implies, *demand* to be read referentially. He has a lot to say about the phenomenon known as "seeing-in"—the viewer's recognition of "inadvertently legible" images or "pictomorphs," whether "declared or unintended." (Sidney Geist has had even more to say about this in the work of Cézanne; it's like the old joke about the sexually obsessed patient accusing the psychiatrist who shows him geometric figures of drawing dirty pictures.) Danto is clearly troubled by the presence of these pictomorphs in Frankenthaler's work and devotes most of his article to discussing them. It's not altogether clear whether he regards them as positive elements or not. He begins by describing them as "visually piquant notes," akin to the spontaneous sounding of a familiar, recognizable theme in a jazz context, then struggles with various ways of seeing the "swans" in *Swan Lake I* and concludes, "I have the sense that Frankenthaler accepted pictomorphs. I am not sure she courted them, but they were made welcome if they dropped in, unless they were too uncouth. For they gave her opportunities for unforeseen developments that may in any other sense be quite abstract, creating rather than capturing a feeling."

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Danto objects to criticism that attempts to make every portion of a Frankenthaler picture legible and explicable, an interesting position for a man who has declared that a useful criterion for works of art is that they can be "explicated." He was in similar straits in a review of the Morris Louis exhibition at MOMA a few years ago. Although Danto's initial premise appeared to be that abstraction like Louis's must be empty, he clearly found himself moved by the pictures, so he concluded that they had some more or less specific, *referential* meaning, if you probed deeply enough. Yet Danto's objections to Frankenthaler's later work are formal ones. He prefers the stain paintings with their transparent color to any of the subsequent pictures, which he dismisses as willful. He dislikes her use of non-transparent paint—typically, Danto invokes Wittgenstein and the question of whether white can be transparent—and objects to what he sees as illusionistic space.

Danto is not alone in finding fault with Frankenthaler in the 1980s, as represented by "A Paintings Retrospective." The problem, to my eye, lies not with the artist, but with the selection. Only one side of Frankenthaler—her lyrical, pastoral side—was represented, and as a result the show ended *diminuendo*. There were some perfectly wonderful pictures among the Eighties works, such as the nervous, edgy, but firmly structured *For E. M.* (1981, private collection), an homage to Edouard Manet yet completely within Frankenthaler's own language of gesture and space, or the austere *Sacrifice Decision* (1981, private collection), like the spirit of a Zen garden translated into nuances of color and surface. But anyone who has seen Frankenthaler's exhibitions over the past few years will remember other kinds of pictures, conspicuously absent from the MOMA show. None of the "rough," less manicured paintings were there, the ones with the large-scale, let-it-all-hang-out drawing and the abrasive color. Frankenthaler is not a painter with a single mood—she'd be far less interesting if she were—and unfortunately the last room of the show failed to represent her fully.

An excellent way for a critic to make a career is to denigrate the admired and exalt the neglected or the forgotten, even though they may have been neglected or forgotten with good reason. It helps if the subject under review belongs to a minority or special interest group and/or is female. The recent elevation of Lee Krasner, a painter not without interest but hardly of the first rank, is a case in point. Frankenthaler has been successful, her work taken seriously, discussed, exhibited in museums, and collected for more than a quarter of a century. She's worked hard, made sacrifices, but she's also lived well. And she's only sixty. It seems to be all right, these days, for a woman to achieve great success in the art world no matter what the quality of her work if she achieves it late enough, like Nevelson or Louise Bourgeois, as though it were necessary to *earn* recognition by enduring years of neglect. (I'm not sure if this applies to the current generation, although I have the impression that the male artists still get most of the attention.)

Frankenthaler's critics appear unable to forgive what her supporters admire her for: having painted audacious, original pictures as a woman in her twenties in a self-consciously macho New York art world, having continued to make audacious, original abstract pictures that can move us profoundly, disturb us, or cheer us up. Yes, it is an achievement for Frankenthaler to keep on distilling her perceptions of light, space, mood, and emotion into color and surface, even while the fundamental assumptions of modernism and abstraction are being questioned. And she's young enough to keep on doing so for some time, for which we can only be grateful.

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Graham Greene: the Catholic novels

by Bruce Bawer

In his long and celebrated literary career—which I began to examine in the last issue of *The New Criterion*—Graham Greene has written some three dozen novels, "entertainments," plays, essays, memoirs, short-story collections, and travel books.[1] But it is those books which, for want of a better term, we may call his Catholic novels (*The Power and the Glory*, *The Heart of the Matter*, *The End of the Affair*, and *A Burnt-Out Case*) and his later political novels (*The Quiet American*, *The Comedians*, *The Honorary Consul*, and *The Human Factor*) that are generally acknowledged, for better or worse, to comprise the nucleus of his oeuvre. Though there are other works by Greene that have scattered and enthusiastic support, critics who speak of Greene's literary mastery tend almost exclusively to cite some or all of the books on this list as evidence of that mastery; and it is the Catholic novels that are mentioned most frequently of all. This being the case, it seems necessary to devote special attention to those books, and to ask certain questions in connection with them, namely: How did Greene come to Catholicism? In what form did Catholicism, in turn, come to enter his work? What does religious faith mean to him, and what role does it play in his fiction?

Considering that Graham Greene is one of the world's most respected Catholic writers, the story of his introduction to the Roman Catholic faith is somewhat less than inspiring. In 1925 Greene met and fell in love with a Catholic girl named Vivien Dayrell-Browning, who declared that she would not marry him unless he converted to her faith. He did so within the year, although Norman Sherry's account, in his recent biography of Greene, shows no evidence of a real conversion, and Greene (in his memoir *A Sort of Life*) is oddly vague and noncommittal: "I can only remember that in January 1926 I became convinced of the probable existence of something we call God, though I now dislike the word with all its anthropomorphic associations and prefer Chardin's 'Omega Point.'" Greene's references to Catholicism in his letters of the period are flippant, as is his reminiscence of his Catholic instruction: "Now it occurred to me, during the long empty mornings, that if I were to marry a Catholic I ought at least to learn the nature and limits of the beliefs she held. It was only fair, since she knew what I believed—in nothing supernatural. Besides, I thought, it would kill the time." (To "kill the time" has, of course, always been an important end for Greene.) For the most part, then, Greene seems to have looked upon his conversion to Catholicism in the same way that he looked upon his youthful association with the German embassy and his entry into the Communist Party—namely, as a means to other ends, in this case marriage to Vivien.

1 Part One of this essay, entitled "'Baseless Dreaming': the Novels of Graham Greene," appeared in the September issue of *The New Criterion*.

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Though the time came when Greene found it useful to place Catholic doctrines and characters at the center of his work, true Catholic piety and reflectiveness have continued to seem alien to him. He has often described himself, paradoxically, as a "Catholic-agnostic." Certainly he has never made any bones about his distrust of orthodox Catholic theology, his utter lack of curiosity about the intellectual underpinnings of the Church. One cannot help but connect him, in this regard, with Henry Pulling's dotty, lawless Aunt Augusta in *Travels with My Aunt*, who, upon being asked if she is really a Roman Catholic, replies, "Yes, my dear, only I just don't believe in all the things they believe in." For Greene, intellectual assent to a set of doctrines prescribed by somebody else has little or nothing to do with being a Catholic; he has always felt free to accept or discard various elements of Roman dogma as he sees fit, and to contort Catholic precepts beyond recognition in order to suit his own psychological needs.

At times, indeed, Greene seems to have disposed of so much of Catholicism that there would appear to be no particular reason to call it Catholicism and not something else. Like Maurice, his protagonist in *The End of the Affair*, he "find[s] it hard to conceive of any God who is not as simple as a perfect equation, as clear as air." Greene much prefers a primitive religion to a doctrinaire, over-intellectualized one; he obviously shares the feeling of Dr. Colin, the African-based leprosy specialist in *A Burnt-Out Case*, when he comments that "it's a strange Christianity we have here, but I wonder whether the Apostles would find it as difficult to recognize as the collected works of Thomas Aquinas. If Peter could have understood those, it would have been an even greater miracle than Pentecost, don't you think? Even the Nicaean Creed—it has the flavour of higher mathematics to me." At one point Querry, the book's protagonist, goes so far as to say that "it would be a good thing for all of us if we were even more superficial."

In this connection, it should be observed that Catholicism served Greene for many years as the locus—the essentially arbitrary locus—of something that he called "faith." A remark that Greene made in a 1986 interview with the *Literaturnaya Gazeta* is of interest. In the interview, he nonchalantly politicized the story of his conversion for the Soviet editors: "The nearer fascism came to us, and the more it spread all over the world, the more necessary it was to oppose it by building moral obstacles to it in the consciousness of the masses. It is here that I opted for faith . . . . I felt it necessary to make faith the symbol of resistance." Patently dishonest though this anti-fascist version of Greene's conversion may be, there is a truth at its center: namely, that Catholicism has generally functioned, in Greene's personal metaphysics, as a sort of escape hatch from the cold-eyed realism of which he is so proud; despite his professed loathing of romanticism, and his much-vaunted "realistic" attitude toward the Western world, the capitalistic system, and the United States, Greene's "faith" has provided him with a means of holding what are basically romantic views of certain aspects of life—in particular of Marxist ideas, exploits, and leaders. As the narrator remarks in *The Heart of the Matter*, "[I]f romance is what one lives by, one must never be cured of it. The world has too many spoilt priests of this faith or that: better surely to pretend a belief than wander in that vicious vacuum of cruelty and despair."

In its emphasis on faith, on the individual's personal relationship with God, and on a vigorous suspicion of prescribed doctrine, Greene's personal version of Christianity might seem to some observers more Protestant (if anything) than Catholic. Yet time and again Greene has gone out of his way to belittle Protestantism in general and the Anglicanism of his birth in particular. At times, indeed, he writes as if it were agreed by the whole world that Catholicism were the only real religion—the only one, that is to say, which can truly inhabit a soul and bring a communicant

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closer to God—and Anglicanism nothing more than a social club, a collection of pompous, empty rituals whose participants give no thought to virtue or sin or the deity. "You are an Englishman," a Portuguese captain says to Scobie, a colonial policeman, in *The Heart of the Matter*. "You wouldn't believe in prayer." Scobie counters, "I'm a Catholic, too." Later in the novel, Scobie reflects that his mistress, Helen, has it good: since she's not a Catholic, "[s]he's lucky. She's free." The implication here—and elsewhere in Greene's oeuvre—is that non-Catholics are innocents of a sort, bound by no moral code and free of the dark and difficult knowledge that Catholics share. Catholicism, in short, is serious; Anglicanism is vain and frivolous. And yet Greene's easy dismissal of orthodox Catholic thought, his audacious distortion of its precepts to suit his own purposes, and his facile fictional use of such concepts as eternal damnation may well strike some readers—Catholic, Anglican, or otherwise—as the very height of vanity and frivolity.

How did a young man who had been brought up in the Church of England end up such a fervent—if iconoclastic—Catholic? The question brings us back, I think, to Greene's childhood at the Berkhamsted School and to his headmaster father's stern sexual precepts; for the more closely one examines Greene's attitude toward religion, the more strongly one feels that conversion to Catholicism must have seemed, to the young Greene, a perfect way of rejecting his Anglican father, even while, in a sense, he was (consciously or not) perpetuating the old man's moral domination over him. For however much of Catholic doctrine Greene chose to leave out of his personal version of the religion, he certainly retained—and, it might be argued, blew out of all proportion—Catholicism's strict views on sex and marriage. In the process he managed to make of the Catholic Church (at least in terms of its sexual teachings) a veritable replica of the Berkhamsted of his youth. The Catholic protagonists in several of his novels, after all, agonize over the sin of fornication in a way that would have been far more familiar to a tormented Victorian (or, in Greene's case, Georgian) public-school boy than it would be to even an unusually devout modern-day Catholic. And so many of his autobiographical protagonists prove to have been educated at seminaries or Jesuit schools that one gets the impression Greene regards such institutions as rough equivalents of Berkhamsted—at least, that is, when it comes to the attitudes toward sex and sin that these schools have inculcated into the souls of their alumni. It is almost as if the young Greene, feeling irrationally guilty as he broke his childhood ties to family and school, found it necessary to replace Berkhamsted with the Catholic Church, and his father with God—and, in the process, also found it necessary to make certain adjustments in Catholicism so that it might more nearly approximate, in temper and teachings, the institution in which he had been raised.

There are other likely reasons for his attraction to Catholicism. Given the fact that Greene, even in his early youth, was a master of suicidal boredom and misanthropic despair, he must surely have seen Roman Catholicism, with its reverence for suffering, as a way of legitimizing his veritable fetishization of misery. Time and again, his Catholic novels equate suffering with life, seriousness, wisdom. "As long as one suffers," he writes in *The End of the Affair*, "one lives." And in *The Heart of the Matter*: "Despair is the price one pays for setting oneself an impossible aim. It is, one is told, the unforgivable sin, but it is a sin the corrupt or evil man never practices. He always has hope. He never reaches the freezing point of knowing absolute failure. Only the man of good will carries always in his heart this capacity for damnation." The epigraph to *The End of the Affair* is from Léon Bloy: "Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering in order that they may have existence." Too often, alas, Greene's fixation

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on suffering seems masochistic, morbid; certainly the notion that religion should be nothing but suffering is as distasteful as the notion that it should be nothing but sweetness and light.

There is one additional factor in Greene's attraction to Catholicism whose importance cannot be underestimated. Norman Sherry's biography mentions only one aspect of Catholicism that genuinely appealed to Greene at the time of his conversion: the belief in hell. As Greene said at the time, "It gives something hard, non-sentimental and exciting." Hard, non-sentimental, and exciting: he might, one cannot but notice, be describing one of his own entertainments. And indeed it seems to have been not so much hell itself but the *melodrama* of hell, and of Catholicism in general, that captivated the young man. To the thoroughly English Greene, Catholicism must have seemed exotic and Latin, must have appealed not only to his personal sense of alienation but to the thrillermeister's love of the sensational. His Catholic novels, in any event, make it clear that Greene cherishes the drama of sin and eternal damnation; one thinks, for example, of the scene in *The Heart of the Matter* in which Scobie, taking communion in a state of mortal sin, is "aware of the pale papery taste of his eternal sentence on the tongue." What other religion could provide higher drama?

Traces of Greene's distinctive view of Catholicism—or of its development—appear in virtually all of Greene's novels. But it reaches its apotheosis in four of them: *The Power and the Glory*, *The Heart of the Matter*, *The End of the Affair*, and *A Burnt-Out Case*. Taken together, these books almost seem to have been designed as a set of Greenian Articles of Faith. The chief tenets of this faith—among them the notion of experience as the road to metaphysical knowledge, of prodigious sin as the path to saintliness—are explored tirelessly in these books; if various other Greene novels convey the idea that it is important to have some kind of faith or to take a stand on one side or the other of a given contest, these four novels spell out Greene's specific brand of faith with considerable precision. Each of them contains a major character who is a sinner, whose central conflict is his struggle with faith, and whose struggle ends in death; invariably, the assumptions upon which the conflict takes place, the terms in which it is presented, and the conclusions which are drawn from its outcome derive entirely from Greene's own iconoclastic version of Catholicism.

For instance, *The Power and the Glory* (1940), set in socialist Mexico in the 1930s, takes as its protagonist a cowardly alcoholic priest who has married one woman and fathered a child by another. This "whiskey priest" (whose name we never learn) is the last Roman Catholic cleric remaining in a province where it's been declared a crime to say Mass; like many a Greene hero, he spends much of the book on the lam from the authorities. This simply structured novel is dense with evocations of rural poverty and with pronouncements about various spiritual topics—good and evil, love and lust, experience and innocence—from which Greene typically doesn't distance himself at all. "[O]ur sins have so much beauty," the whiskey priest declares at one point. "I'm a bad priest, you see. I know—from experience—how much beauty Satan carried down with him when he fell. Nobody ever said the fallen angels were the ugly ones." It is his corruption, the priest says, that has brought him close to God: as a "comparatively innocent" young man, he was "unbearable." (In Greene's novels, of course, innocent men are invariably unbearable.) And indeed we are meant to understand, at the book's conclusion, that for all his sin the priest may well be something of a saint.

Though Greene does not depart radically here from the brisk, lucid manner of his early novels and entertainments, he does—rather like Hemingway in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*—attempt to modify his characteristic precision and simplicity in the direction of a certain austere stateliness, and thereby to give his "whiskey priest" a magnitude, and

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even a kind of coarse nobility, that his previous heroes didn't have. As in Hemingway's novel, however, the results of this stylistic modification are questionable. For one thing, the frequent appearance of colons between strings of independent clauses ("The squad of police made their way back to the station: they walked raggedly with rifles slung anyhow: ends of cotton where buttons should have been: a puttee slipping down over the ankle: small men with black secret Indian eyes") seems to have no *raison d'être* other than the author's affectation; for another, the novel's plainness of style ("He hustled them out: one by one they picked their way across the clearing towards the hut: and the old man set off down the path toward the river to take the place of the boy who watched the ford for soldiers") feels strained and phony in the way of the most self-parodic Hemingway.

Patently, Greene seeks to convey in this novel a solemn, intense vision of the human condition—a vision in which there would appear to be little room for the humor that helps (occasionally, at least) to relieve the darkness of his earlier books. But it's less a vision, really, than a contrivance, a repetitive and deliberate hammering away at the irony of the priest's position as "a damned man putting God into the mouths of men." The priest constantly flagellates himself, and we're plainly meant to be moved by his distress; but because that supposed distress is, for the most part, simply reiterated, rather than being reflected in a serious effort to change his ways, it's hard to take it very seriously. It's hard, for that matter, to believe that *Greene* takes it seriously: for the novel shows every sign of having been built less upon a passionate devotion to the idea of God than upon a view—at once glib, sentimental, patronizing, and upper-crust-Protestant—of swarthy, dirt-poor, Romance-language-speaking Catholics as close to the earth and, *ipso facto*, close to the Almighty.

The sinner at the heart of *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), which takes place during World War II, is Major Scobie, the middle-aged assistant police commissioner in a British colonial town on the West African coast. Described by his superior as "Scobie the Just," by a Syrian trader as "a just man," by a local MI5 agent named Wilson as "too damned honest to live," and by his wife, Louise, as "the typical second man . . . [t]he one who always does the work," Scobie has been stationed in this town for fifteen years—"too long to go," as he puts it—and he has a rare understanding of and compassion for the natives. He also is a Catholic (he married into the faith) and a loyal husband, and has the sort of less-than-rosy outlook of which Greene approves: "It seemed to Scobie that life was immeasurably long. Couldn't the test of man have been carried out in fewer years? Couldn't we have committed our first major sin at seven, have ruined ourselves for love or hate at ten, have clutched at redemption on a fifteen-year-old death bed?"

Love, sin, and redemption are, as it happens, the principal concerns here; and the first intimation of peril comes when Wilson becomes infatuated with Louise. But Scobie's true downfall begins when he encounters a boatful of shipwreck survivors, falls swiftly in love with one of them—a young widow named Helen Rolt—and commences to break his marital vows while Louise is away: "God can wait, he thought: how can one love God at the expense of one of his creatures?" During his affair with Helen, Scobie is insufferable—although Greene doesn't seem to *intend* for him to be insufferable—about the threat of perdition hanging over his head. "If you believe in hell," Helen asks him, "why are you with me now?" Good question. And after Louise's return, Scobie finds himself in a spiritual bind: if he doesn't take communion with Louise, she'll know he committed a mortal sin; if he does take it with the taint of his adultery on his soul, he will (he believes) be irredeemably damned. In the end, he chooses the latter; and, after taking communion ("O God, I offer up my damnation to you"), whining to Helen about it ("I'm damned for all eternity . . . . What I've done is far worse

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than murder"), and wallowing for a while in self-pity ("This was what human love had done to him—it had robbed him of love for eternity"), he commits suicide—which, we've been told, "puts a man outside mercy." For those who haven't caught the irony here, Greene has already spelled it out: "Only the man of good will carries always in his heart this capacity for damnation."

With its solemn (if often highly dubious) aphorisms about love, damnation, and eternity, its consistently elevated tone, its sweltering and exotic African setting (whose purpose is perhaps to suggest at once the intensity of Scobie's passions, the extremity of his spiritual crisis, and the torment of hell), and its unyielding focus upon a man's relentless march toward his own everlasting doom, this novel seems to insist, with every sentence, on its own greatness. And many readers, over the years, have agreed that it *is* great. But is it? For a man who believes that adultery is a path to hell, Scobie certainly doesn't seem to put up much of a struggle against temptation—which makes it hard to take all the rhetoric about God and sin and damnation very seriously. Nor does he try very hard to escape his doom after sleeping with Helen; he presents himself in the confessional, to be sure, but since he can't promise to avoid seeing Helen, the priest can't guarantee a valid absolution. It's absurd: if Scobie truly believes his soul is on the line, why doesn't he do everything in his power to avoid Helen? Or at least, for heaven's sake, skip communion till the romance blows over? His behavior is so irrational, so preposterously gentlemanly, so *English*; to read about his fate is to feel that a real Catholic could never have invented such a character, a man who would sacrifice his eternal soul to avoid creating a scene.

What Greene has manufactured here is a public-school heroic fantasy which has no relevance whatsoever to the real world, Catholic or otherwise; in the person of Scobie, Greene brings together a rigid Catholic faith (which might be found in a certain kind of man) with a readiness to commit adultery (which might be characteristic of another, very different sort of man); combining the two traits, however, results not in a portrait of a complex, full-blooded individual but in an unbelievable concoction that reflects only its creator's obsessions. It may be that the only way one can easily understand Scobie, in real-world terms, is as a man who has for years been waiting for a good reason to kill himself. Certainly his thoughts are full of the subject: he ponders the fact that "[d]eath never comes when one desires it most"; he reflects of his long-deceased daughter that she "was safe now, for ever" (like many Greene characters, he considers death a sanctuary).[2] If *The Heart of the Matter* is effective, it is largely as a demonstration of the ability of emotionally disturbed individuals to twist religion into a tool of self-destruction.

The End of the Affair (1951), like *The Heart of the Matter*, depicts a fatal romantic triangle. Set in London and its environs, the novel is described by its narrator and protagonist, a writer named Maurice Bendrix, as "a record of hate far more than of love." As the novel opens in January of 1946, Bendrix learns from his friend Henry Miles, a high-ranking member of the government, that Henry's wife, Sarah, may be having an affair; Bendrix is hurt, for unbeknownst to Henry, he had enjoyed a three-year liaison with Sarah himself until, a year and a half earlier, she broke it off inexplicably and Bendrix "began quite seriously to think of suicide." Now, desperate to know the truth, Bendrix engages a detective; the man pinches Sarah's diary, and it is from this document that Bendrix learns why she separated from him. One day, thinking him dead in an air raid, she had prayed to God: "Let him be alive, and I *will* believe . . . . I'll give him up for ever, only let him be alive." When Bendrix

2 Interestingly, Scobie's suicide is foreshadowed by that of another British officer, whose note contains a sentence reminiscent of Greene's own early missives: "*It's a pity I'm not in the army because then I might be killed.*"

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indeed proved to be alive, Sarah kept her word to God, and ever since has been engaged in a struggle with the idea of God, resenting Him, seeking advice from a fanatical anti-religionist, and pouring her heart into her diary: "I want Maurice. I want ordinary corrupt human love. Dear God, you know I want to want Your pain, but I don't want it now." Bendrix refuses to take God seriously as a rival, and seeks to revive their affair. But he succeeds only (through an unfortunate happenstance) in bringing about Sarah's death—and learns afterward that she had been taking instruction in Catholicism, a faith into which (though she never knew it) she had been baptized as a child.

In many ways *The End of the Affair* is one of Greene's best books. It is exquisitely shaped and paced, the people and their relationships seem real, and both the passion and the bitterness ring true; though plenty of abstractions are brought into play, one does not constantly have the feeling that the characters serve merely as symbolic tokens. Yet, reading Sarah's diary account of her discovery of faith, one does want to ask the question: why Catholicism and not Anglicanism? Why must belief in a Creator necessarily lead, in the world according to Greene, to belief—as Sarah puts it—in "the whole bag of tricks" of the Catholic Church? The revelation of Sarah's childhood Catholicism suggests that Greene wants us to see her recent enthusiasm for the faith as some sort of mystical event, a reclaiming of Sarah, as it were, by God; but this reading, it seems to me, cheapens the book, turns it into a kind of religious thriller. (Do even pious Catholics believe that God plays such games?) One prefers to think that Sarah chooses Catholicism because it is the one Christian faith that would flatly forbid her to divorce Henry and marry Maurice—an act against which her sense of guilt about the affair rebels. To posit such a reading is not to deny the sublimity of religious faith, but merely to acknowledge the importance—to life, to literature, and even perhaps to God—of human character and psychology; what makes *The End of the Affair* more successful than *The Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter* is its greater appreciation of that importance.

A Burnt-Out Case (1961), the last of Greene's explicitly Catholic books, is in some ways a departure from its predecessors. It begins with the mysterious arrival of Querry, a world-famous church architect, at a small Central African leper hospital on a remote tributary of the Congo. Querry has come to the hospital—which is run by Catholic priests and by one Dr. Colin, and which is crowded with "burnt-out cases" (patients, many of them disfigured and impaired, from whose systems the leprosy infection has totally disappeared)—to finish out his life away from civilization. Why? Because in his own way Querry is a burnt-out case, too; or so, at least, he tells everyone who's ready to listen. Yes, he's perfectly scrupulous, well-functioning: "You are a whole man as far as one can see," says Parkinson, a sleazy reporter who tracks him down to the hospital. But Querry knows better: he's lost his faith. In contrast to his parents' simple, instinctive religion, he had constructed an edifice of logical proofs of the existence of God; but his realization that he didn't truly accept those proofs has caused an emotional crisis. He realizes he's been deceiving himself: he's never really loved ("Perhaps it's true that you can't believe in a god without loving a human being or love a human being without believing in a god"), never built a church for love of anything but himself ("To build a church when you don't believe in a god seems a little indecent, doesn't it?"). He'd always thought himself dedicated to God, but knows now that "anything he had ever done must have been done for love of himself." If Sarah, in *The End of the Affair*, longs for the suffering that will mark her as a true Christian, Querry is past all that: "I suffer from nothing. I no longer know what suffering is. I have come to an end of all that . . . ." (One of the novel's epigraphs comes from Dante: "I did not die, yet nothing of life remained.")

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Over the next few months, Querry assists the priests and helps them plan a new hospital. Ironically, when he saves a man's life he is celebrated as a saint by the ignoble Parkinson, the innocent Father Thomas, and the intellectual M. Rycker (a local factory manager and former seminarian); yet when he is falsely accused of having an affair with Mme. Rycker, those who declared him a saint are the first to condemn him. Interestingly—in what seems to be something of a move away from Greene's earlier concentration on faith, and toward a doctrine of good works—Querry's staunchest ally (and the most sympathetic and level-headed character in the book) is Dr. Colin, who "had long ago . . . lost faith in any god that a priest would have recognized," but who, despite his atheism, we are manifestly supposed to admire for his tireless dedication to the sick. Likewise, we're supposed to admire the priests (except for Father Thomas), who "would much prefer to talk about turbines" than about canon law, and who are "too busy to bother themselves with what the Church considered sin (moral theology was the subject they were least concerned with)."

And we *do* admire them. But it's hard to admire Querry. Though he's a decent enough chap, his enthusiasm for his own suffering is wearisome in the extreme; it comes across as the manifestation not of a crisis of faith (as Greene would have us believe) but of severe neurosis. Querry keeps insisting upon his inability to love and to believe, but it's all just words, words, words: his torment is never dramatized, just endlessly proclaimed. And to a large extent, it's simply too weird and too abstract to identify with: he can't make love anymore, he says, because sex should be an enacting of God's love for his people and he can no longer believe in God. We're apparently meant to see all this soul-searching as part of a sacred struggle, but for the most part it seems merely solipsistic, selfish; and it seems especially so because at the *léproserie* he is surrounded by people—among them many small children—who have a much more visible reason than he does to bewail their fates. Yet not even the sight of armless babies can take Querry out of himself for very long, and Greene doesn't seem to intend the irony: to him, as to Querry, the leprosy patients are basically set decoration, their physical disfigurement a metaphor for Querry's spiritual mutilation. Likewise, when Querry compares his own late, lamented intellectual Catholicism with his parents' "simple and uncomplex heart[s]," Greene doesn't seem to want us to find him arrogant—but of course we do. Even Dr. Colin regards Querry as a privileged character; when a priest suggests that publicity for the hospital might attract funds that could help hundreds of lepers, Dr. Colin rejects the idea because it wouldn't be good for Querry. "Limelight," he says, "is not very good for the mutilated."

There are logical problems with the book, too. The idea of a church architect as celebrity is a bit difficult to buy. And then there are certain questions of motivation: Querry claims to have come to the *léproserie* in order to escape the world, the Church, *la bête humaine*; yet, if this is the case, how did he happen to end up as a veritable social worker in a part of Central Africa that seems to contain more Catholics than the Vatican? And why, if he didn't want reporters to track him down, did he give everyone along the way his real name? Greene shows no sign of doubting Querry's motives. Then, as in *The Heart of the Matter*, there's the suicide angle. "A man can't live with nothing but himself," Dr. Colin says; "[s]ooner or later he would kill himself." Yes, Querry replies, "[i]f he had enough interest." Like Scobie, he seems essentially to be a suicide in search of a catalyst.

For the most part, indeed, all of Greene's so-called Catholic novels seem ultimately to have less to do with religion, *per se*, than with psychopathology—and, one might add, with melodramatic artifice; as I've suggested in connection with *The End of the Affair*, it might even be more nearly correct to call them religious thrillers. To be sure, they have been treated very respectfully by critics and

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readers, and it is true that their deeply afflicted protagonists, their solemn metaphysical utterances, their grand abstractions, their richly symbolic settings, and their tragic endings tend to enforce the impression that Greene is a serious—perhaps even a profound—laborer in the fields of spiritual allegory. Yet to read these books in sequence is to become increasingly aware of the overly manipulated characters, the windy rhetoric, the author's glib misreading of the human heart. There are so many immense abstractions planted so closely together here that few of them have room to grow into life; but then it would be virtually impossible for *any* story to bear the weight of meaning that Greene seeks to impose on these tales. All four books, furthermore, are informed not only by the extreme notion—as expressed in the Charles Péguy quotation that Greene used as an epigraph to *The Heart of the Matter*—that "[t]he sinner is at the heart of Christianity," but also by Greene's even more extreme corollary that the greater one's sins are, the closer one is to God, and the more likely one is to be a saint. While this may sound like clever theology, in practice it's simply offensive: if we are to believe such things, then how are we to feel about Hitler? In this and other such pronouncements by Greene, one hears the voice not of a serious moral philosopher but of the melodramatist, the author of thrillers out for sheer effect.

This essay will conclude in the next issue of The New Criterion.

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Bicentennial blahs

by Jed Perl

It's a long time since Paris was regarded as a seedbed for contemporary style in the visual arts. French prestige began to erode after World War II, and by the time Pop art arrived in the Sixties, even the French could see how high New York had risen. By the Seventies, as developments in Germany and Italy caught up with and passed America, France found itself, for the first time in maybe four hundred years, a second-rate artistic power. In the Eighties, France has only fallen farther behind: along with playing a supporting role to Italy and Germany, France is now overshadowed by Spain, England, Russia, and Eastern Europe as well. Most of the new European art we see in New York is as instantly forgettable as the occasional French imports that do come our way. But the conventional wisdom has it that the French can't innovate and other Europeans can; and American art professionals nowadays visit Paris for the food, the shopping, the cafés—for everything except the contemporary art.

Maybe there isn't any worthwhile art being created in Paris today; but considering the extent to which the curators at French museums are now fixated on international developments, I doubt they could recognize something homegrown and authentic if it did come their way. Parisians are painfully aware that foreigners, American and otherwise, expect no further chapters in the history of French painting. And if the events scheduled in Paris for the bicentennial summer just passed are any measure, the French are now hell-bent on proving to the world that they, too, can refuse to be Francocentric.

Going to look at contemporary art in Paris today, you have the same everything-is-one-thing experience you have in Amsterdam or London or L.A. "Magicians of the Earth" was the title of the big international show mounted over the summer at the Pompidou Center and at the Great Hall of La Villette, the new exhibition space in northern Paris. There was nothing French about "Magicians"—it could have been an event at Documenta in Berlin or the Venice Biennale. Meanwhile, *La Fée Electronique*, a multimedia provocation arranged by the Korean-born, American-bred Nam June Paik in front of Dufy's sublime *La Fée Electricité* at the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris, was the oddest bicentennial celebration imaginable: a slap in the face of French art. "Magicians" and *La Fée Electronique* were meant to prove to us that everything is now plugged into everything else: that the distance separating the Pompidou Center from the Whitney Museum in New York is no greater than the distance separating the Pompidou from the artists' studios in the Bastille quarter a couple of Métro stops away. And many people have been seduced by this vision of art as flourishing in a post-McLuhan global village, even though such a vision flies in the face of the most basic facts of artistic experience.

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Artists are, with few exceptions, stay-at-homes, and for good reason. A dematerialized world of telephonic communication, magazine reproductions, air travel, and international get-togethers takes them away from the stubborn materialism of what they do. It was Paris that taught Picasso and Mondrian and Gris and Miró and de Chirico how to give their dreams a concrete form. For two hundred years it was Paris that taught the whole world that in art materialism is the key to the sublime. And now the French, of all people, are forgetting their own essential lesson. If French painting really is dead, at least the French could have spent the bicentennial summer showing what French painting had been about. But French officialdom is in no mood for mourning or recollection. (It does not understand that mourning can help us resolve our relation to the past and move ahead.) At the Pompidou Center pride of place is given to the trendy stuff some of us wish we hadn't seen in SoHo in the first place.

Barbara Kruger kicked off the first half of "Magicians of the Earth" with a word picture *en français*. Specially designed for the show, this free-standing structure was emblazoned with the big question—"Who are the magicians of the earth?"—followed by a list of possible candidates, among them secretaries, art dealers, mothers, doctors, politicians, critics, soldiers, movie stars, artists, and taxi drivers. Kruger's oversized poster was probably meant to provoke thought among the large heterogeneous audience that visits the Pompidou. Any one of you, Kruger was saying, might be the subject of this elaborate exhibition. The show itself—which juxtaposed work by current art stars of the Kiefer and Cucchi ilk with work by folk artists from less developed countries around the globe—probably left most visitors with more question marks in their minds than there were on Kruger's poster. The organizers provided the international art stars and the Third World craftsmen with small one-person shows. These were interspersed in separate but equal areas that gave a sense of juxtaposed accomplishments without presuming to make explicit connections between one artist and another. In presenting this curious amalgam, the curators explained that they wanted to reveal "a bond between works of art by demonstrating the universality of the creative act." The show was exactly the kind of banal, labored mess that curators with universality on their minds regard as exciting.

With the Pompidou moving into its second decade, it was thought to be a good time to correct a policy that had tended, in previous years, to show almost exclusively the work of Western artists. Much was made of the fact that the artists from Mexico and Haiti and other Third World countries were presented as individuals—just like the artists from Mary Boone. Visitors who thought the show went "Thud!" could be accused of racism. But couldn't the organizers in their turn be accused of propagating the arrogantly elitist idea that the folk artists needed the company of the art stars to lend them luster? If the Pompidou was so eager to redress the balance, why not a show just of folk artists? Well . . . because no one would fund it? Barbara Kruger might have been suggesting that anybody—a doctor, a secretary, a taxi driver—was a magician of the earth. But the design of the show told visitors that only an artist could be one. And the subtext told visitors that only an art star could be one.

Global pluralism isn't a viewpoint that "Magicians of the Earth" could be said to entertain seriously. Global pluralism is merely a marketing strategy, designed to add new pizzazz to the same old god-awful art. What diversion there was to be had at the Pompidou Center was low-level indeed. Kiefer offered a new brand of Kiefer: a piece you could walk into, a sort of free-standing closet hung with lead sheets. I found Polke the most engaging of the bunch. *Jeux d'enfants* (1988) is good sloppy fun: splashes of green and purple run riot amidst a couple of silk-screened rococo cupids. The thirty-year-old Julio Galan, whose show at Annina Nosei in New York last season was widely

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noted, again offered his mild impersonations of Mexican folk imagery—paintings in soft, tarnished colors that evoke hand-painted store façades and provincial religious art, and are sometimes encrusted with rhinestones. Of the artists who await their SoHo apotheoses, I noted Dossou Amidou of Benin, who does bright, graphic masks, and Felipe Linares of Mexico, who does amusing fantastical animals in papier-mâché. I suppose the only thing to say about these folk artists is that, in this context, their work was no more or less effective than that of anyone else. Having gone through the show at Pompidou, I couldn't bring myself to take the Métro out to the second half at La Villette.

A French friend remarks of Nam June Paik, who had a place of honor at "Magicians of the Earth" with a humongous vehicle made of video monitors, that his prestige has been inextricably linked with that of Pontus Hulten, the international art impresario who has headed the Pompidou Center, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and the Palazzo Grassi in Venice. "Pontus," my friend says, "brought Nam June Paik along when he came to Paris to take over Pompidou. Unfortunately, Nam June Paik didn't leave when Pontus left." At the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris, Nam June Paik was given the opportunity to make a contribution to the bicentennial celebrations. In the catalogue, Suzanne Pagé of the museum remarked, "When looking around for an artist capable of 'bearing witness' both right now and for tomorrow in the context of the Bicentenary celebrations of the French Revolution, it soon became evident Nam June Paik was one of the few truly universal figures in the thinking and creation of today." (The odd English translation is from the catalogue.) As at "Magicians of the Earth," universality is the goal and chaos is the result. Nam June Paik's *La Fée Electronique* is chaos of an especially insidious sort: it is set up in front of the enormous U-shaped mural that Raoul Dufy had painted for the Pavilion of Light at the 1937 Paris World's Fair. Significantly, *La Fée Electronique* appeared in Paris at exactly the moment that the Museum of Modern Art in New York had invited Scott Burton to use the museum's Brancusi collection as raw material for his own "Burton on Brancusi" event. Like "Burton on Brancusi," Nam June Paik's multimedia extravaganza suggests that the only way left to make museums interesting is by turning their permanent collections into postmodern happenings. Brancusi's reputation as a major modern is able to withstand any assault. Dufy, who remains one of the most underrated of twentieth-century artists, can ill afford the wrong kind of attention.

The events leading up to Nam June Paik's *La Fée Electronique* are tangled indeed, a case of a contemporary artist using the distorted perspectives of postmodernist revisionism to appropriate and annihilate the past in one fell swoop. It was about a decade ago that the controlled hedonism of Dufy's art began to attract the avant-garde, not in spite of the neglect into which modernism had plunged him but precisely because of it. People who understood nothing of the disciplined artistry that enabled Dufy to carry his paintings of orchestras and racetracks into the empyrean began to praise him as a fun kinda guy. Dufy *is* a fun kinda guy, though fun is something he is at pains to present not as a life process but as an aesthetic ideal. When the Holly Solomon Gallery in New York (where Nam June Paik shows) mounted a major Dufy exhibit in 1984, I felt trepidation. Pattern Painters such as Kim MacConnel, who also shows at Solomon, might genuinely admire Dufy; but it was important to keep in mind that MacConnel was a funster whose work was all process without resolution, the exact opposite of Dufy. Since that Dufy show, I've had some good moments at Holly Solomon: William Wegman and Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt have their winningly goofy flights of inspiration; and as an impresario Solomon can pull off some amusingly rococo effects, as in the "American Baroque" show that she mounted with twenty-one artists, including

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Nam June Paik, in her gallery last December. But it's one thing to throw together a high-level art party and imagine that you're sending us back to the great days of Bernini and Fragonard (you're not); it's quite another thing for Nam June Paik to set up a happening, high-level or otherwise, in front of a masterpiece that actually does recapture for modern art the shimmering effects of what might be called the ecstatic-baroque.

Dufy's *La Fée Electricité* is the most underrated work on permanent display in Paris. This monumental summation of the uses of energy, light, and electricity through history doesn't always sustain the highest imaginative level—this is a problem it shares with many other large-scale painted decorations. But like Rubens in the Maria de Medici cycle in the Louvre, Dufy in *La Fée Electricité* has the pictorial imagination required to render the impersonal personal. Dufy's inimitable combination of transparency and lucidity lights up everything he reveals: fields of sun-ripened wheat; a neon city at dusk. Dufy dazzles with the reach of his imagination: he keeps presenting new sides of his story.

It is in front of this pictorial extravaganza that Nam June Paik has set up his campy fun fest. There are seven robots, named after heroes of the French Revolution, made of old retro-chic TV carcasses outfitted with TV monitors that flash a blitz of images, some revolution-related. Nam June Paik probably imagines that his splattering video collage is an analogy to the pulsation of Dufy's color. But Samsung Electronics (who underwrote Nam June Paik's debacle) is no match for Dufy's oil paint. Never has the keyed-up color of state-of-the-art TV looked so low-key. Of course, Dufy carries the day; but why on earth is he being subjected to this onslaught by the very curators whose job it is to safeguard his work?

The identity crisis of the School of Paris dates back more than a generation. A retrospective of the work of the painter Jean Fautrier, mounted at the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris alongside Nam June Paik's *La Fée Electronique*, took us to the exact point in the 1950s when Paris began to forget what it meant to be Paris. Fautrier, who was born in 1898 and died in 1964, did some creditable still lifes and landscapes in the late Twenties: they're dark, thickish paintings, reminiscent of Braque and Derain, and also of the work of Italian modernists such as Sironi and Campigli. Fautrier's fame, however, came after World War II, when his tan and bluish abstractions, with their great swells of paint, were touted by Parisians, including André Malraux, as the French response to Abstract Expressionism. Fautrier was said to be the French Pollock, an encomium that will sound absurd even to people who believe that Pollock is overrated. Fautrier's small-scale paintings are muffled and aimless. Their *art informel* amorphousness makes a definitive break with the French concern for classical construction; but Fautrier hasn't a clue as to how one might explode French conventions in order to find something new, which is what the best Abstract Expressionists did, especially Hofmann. Fautrier represents Parisian taste at the point when it loses its nerve in a panic over the impending rise of New York.

"Magicians of the Earth" and *La Fée Electronique* are only the latest manifestations of a French art establishment that's determined not to fall behind New York. The irony is that now, when New York itself feels unsure of its authority, Paris can think of nothing to do except mimic the many ways in which New York expresses its insecurity. On the main floor of the Pompidou there was a Hans Haacke show this past summer. He's an artist who can explain certain things about how power is wielded in the modern world; but an explication of the power politics that gives major museum retrospectives to teeny artists such as Hans Haacke eludes his grasp. Upstairs, in the permanent collection, Jean Hélion, an artist whose work is a virtual encyclopedia of the lessons that New York and Paris should be teaching to each other, was pretty much invisible, despite the very fine and very large group of works that the Pompidou possesses. The

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only room with good natural light was being wasted on the Dadaist monochromes of Yves Klein. And Balthus, represented by a couple of paintings, including his magnificent *Painter and Model* from the beginning of this decade, was saddled with the terrible artificial lighting that is the rule in this interior design by Gae Aulenti, an Italian whose Parisian commissions include the hideously overblown Musée d'Orsay.

The School of Paris may have died of natural causes, but the people who run the French museums were in an unnatural haste to inter the body. In France, modern art has passed out of existence as it came into existence—without official sanction. Now the French feel that they have nothing indigenous to offer and go on absurdist expeditions in search of the Magicians of the Earth.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

On Kitaj's "Diasporist Manifesto" *by Jed Perl*
Harvard's new history of French literature *by Renee Winegarten*
Cinéma-falsité: Dziga Vertov and early Soviet film *by Jeremy Murray-Brown*
John Ashbery and John Updike as art critics *by Deborah Solomon*
Growing up with Maxim Gorky *by David Gurewich*
Picasso, Braque & Cubism *by Karen Wilkin*
The poetry of John Berryman *by Bruce Bawer*

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Poems *by Henri Coulette, Jane Kenyon & Herbert Morris*

Tenure

They knew the conjugations of the flesh;
I knew the day's lesson.
A noun is the name of a person, place, or thing.

I did the possible:
I memorized their names, smiled my smile,
And taught, small miracle,

One girl, Carolyn Bywater, to tell time,
And tell it she did, by God!
Each minute past became a fallen sparrow.

One June day a bell rang.
They left. They went out into their lives, and left
the squeak in the chalk forever.

That was a thousand thousand sparrows ago.
They are like old bluebooks now—
Telling, untold, indecipherable.

—*Henri Coulette*

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At the Spanish Steps in Rome

Keats had come with his friend Severn
for the mild Roman winter. Afternoons
they walked to the Borghese Gardens
to see fine ladies, nannies with babies,
and the dapper mounted officers
whose horses moved sedately
along the broad and sandy paths.

But soon the illness kept him in.
Severn kept trying in that stoutly
cheerful English way: he rented a spinnet,
hauled it three flights, turning it end
up on the landings, and played Haydn every day.

Love letters lay unopened in a chest.
"To see her hand writing would break my heart."

The poet's anger rose as his health sank.
He began to refer to his *posthumous*
existence. One day while Severn and the porter
watched he flung, dish by dish, his catered
meal into the street.

Now the room where Keats died is a museum,
closed for several hours midday with the rest
of Rome. Waiting on the Steps in the wan
October sun I see the curator's pale,
exceptionally round face looking down.
Everything that was not burned that day
in accordance with the law is there.

—*Jane Kenyon*

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Spring snow

A thoughtful snow comes falling . . .
seems to hang in the air before
concluding that it must fall
here. Huge aggregate flakes

alight on the muddy ruts
of March, and the standing
water that thaws by day
and freezes again by night.

Venus is content to shine unseen
this evening, having risen serene
above springs, and false springs.
But I, restless after supper, pace

the long porch while the snow falls,
dodging the clothesline I won't
use until peonies send up red,
plump, irrepressible spears.

—*Jane Kenyon*

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When it stops

for Lauren, for Andrew

Inside the globe which is the sky
sits a small castle on a hill
with a pale lemon-colored roof
and tiny openings cut out

meant to be windows, painted black,
each curtained with an edge of white,
a touch, no more, a dot or two,
hung in the corner like fine lace,

lace you can almost picture moving
back and forth, gently, back and forth
in the breeze, should there be a breeze,
lace you hear rustle if you listen.

Except that it is winter now,
doors and windows are shut, shut tight:
the cold will be held out tonight
and the children kept safe, made warm.

From each window, behind white lace,
lamplight pours to the field below,
lamplight as bright as any sun,
even brighter, thick, rich, deep yellow.

The castle grounds lie still, lie white,
so much white beneath lemon roofs,
so much white mixed with yellow light,
it hurts to take such brightness in,

yet you keep coming back for more,
a second look, some new, small flame
which, the first time, you may have missed,
something, anything, that could blind you.

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When you turn the globe upside down,
holding it kindly in your hand,
the weather changes all at once
and the child's castle changes with it:

the white that made the field so still
is rising to the sky, now fills it
with the snow of a storm so blinding
it may take hours or days to settle.

When it stops, and you know it stops—
so deep a fall surely the children,
were they out in it, would be lost,
surely could not find their way back—,

you can tell ground apart from sky
only by the way the hand holds it,
turning it this way, that, until
the lemon roof has written on it

snow which will spell out LITTLE CASTLE
just above where the children sleep,
the scene once more at rest, or nearly,
the weather clear, or clearing, calm.

The lamps once more pour light, pour yellow;
the children, warm, turn, dream of snow.
Beneath the fall the field lies quiet.
The sky is up, the ground below.

When it stops, you go back to look,
taking in as much as you can.
It will hurt as much as before,
which is the way the eye would have it,

and the mind with it: to be blinded
again, again, each time one looks,
yet, with all this light, all this looking,
never, never, to have enough.

—Herbert Morris

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Music

Marian Anderson: the diva from Philadelphia

by Samuel Lipman

As electronic technology advances from 78s, LPs, and audio cassettes to CDs, the lovers of song hold onto their memories, cherishing the great performances of the past as they continue to re-appear in ever newer, and on the whole better, sonic manifestations. The new RCA CD re-issue of performances by the American contralto Marian Anderson,[1] in documenting an important part of this remarkable artist's career, can only arouse our deepest gratitude for the miracle of sound recording, even as it confirms our present propensity to look to the past for vocal splendor and beauty.

Born in Philadelphia in 1902, the daughter of poor parents, Marian Anderson was what used to be called a Negro and what is today called a black. That is not the most important fact about her, though reasons of fate and the ill will of many people, past and present, conspire to make any account of her life incomplete without mention of the "race question" as it affected her and her audience. *Ars longa, vita brevis*: the most important fact about Marian Anderson is that in her prime she was one of the greatest singing artists of the century.

First, a few facts about her career. She studied singing in Philadelphia, financed by a small educational fund from her church. In 1925, she won first prize in a New York Philharmonic competition, and duly sang with the orchestra at an outdoor concert in Lewisohn Stadium in August of that year. Though the appearance was successful, her American career languished, and at the end of the 1920s she decided to go to Europe, to undertake further study in German *Lieder* and, one must assume, to try to succeed in a less color-conscious musical environment. In the early 1930s she proved triumphant in Scandinavia, and soon thereafter sang in Salzburg, where Arturo Toscanini, hearing her at the Mozarteum, is said to have remarked: "A voice like yours is heard only once in a hundred years."

But clearly the turning point for Miss Anderson (she always was called Miss Anderson, and there seems to be no good reason today to do otherwise) was her discovery in 1935 by the mythical Russian-Jewish-American impresario Sol Hurok at a Paris recital in the Salle Gaveau. Hurok immediately signed her to an American contract and presented her at the end of that year in a rapturously received New York recital at Town Hall.[2] The concert was covered by Howard Taubman of *The New*

1 RCA CD 7911-2-RG.

2 Hurok's account of his discovery and management of Miss Anderson is contained in *Impresario*, a memoir by Sol Hurok in collaboration with Ruth Goode, published in 1946. Though romanticized, woolly, and factually elusive, it effectively conveys the atmosphere of a lost time when high art was seen as contributing to the achievement of world understanding and unity.

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York Times, who would go on to become the paper's chief critic but who was at the time only an assistant; Taubman was joined later in the evening by the *Times*'s chief critic, Olin Downes. Their reviews were ecstatic, and two Carnegie Hall recitals followed in the same season. The young singer, still in her early thirties, was launched as a star.

Her European successes continued, and here in America national tour followed national tour. More was still to come: Miss Anderson broke out into extra-artistic fame when, in 1939, the Daughters of the American Revolution blindly refused to let her sing a Washington, D.C., recital in Constitution Hall, which they owned and from which they excluded Negroes. With the patronage of Eleanor Roosevelt, Hurok arranged that the concert take place at the Lincoln Memorial. Seventy-five thousand people were present, and the event became a milestone in the Negro battle for civic equality.

Miss Anderson's career flourished throughout the 1940s, and a great wrong was righted when she finally was invited by Rudolf Bing to appear at the Metropolitan Opera in 1955. She sang in a performance of Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera* with tenor Jan Peerce. Though her Met debut occurred late in her career, it signified better than words what had been lost to the operatic public through prejudice and obscurantism. In 1957 she made a much-publicized tour under State Department auspices to the Far East, singing for American troops in South Korea and for local audiences in Vietnam and Japan. Everywhere she was recognized as an artist-heroine, and by her Carnegie Hall farewell recital in 1965 she had become an American institution.

Marian Anderson's career lasted into the LP era, and post-78 RPM transfers, along with original LPs, have made it possible to study all the stages of her artistic development. Fortunately, the proper documentation is to be found on a 1986 HMV (England) Treasury LP,[3] a Pearl (England) LP,[4] and a 1956 RCA collection devoted to Negro spirituals,[5] in addition to the new RCA CD. The RCA CD effectively brackets her career: it contains a 1924 recording of a spiritual as well as an impressive excerpt from *Un ballo in maschera* made at the time of her Metropolitan appearance in 1955, along with performances from Miss Anderson's American years. The HMV Treasury LP covers Miss Anderson's decade abroad from 1928 to 1938, and the Pearl LP presents in detail her European recordings from the years 1927 to 1930.

The artistic achievement that emerges from all these performances is consistent, full of developing vocal splendor, and musically unforgettable. In the 1924 performance of "Go Down, Moses," her voice, as heard in the RCA transfer from the primitive, acoustically recorded original, is not altogether pleasing in its tight focus and unvarying color. Yet her youthful sound, one year before winning the New York Philharmonic appearance, is extraordinary, for it achieves a pure stream of silvery tone, free from flutter and wobble, as Miss Anderson's sound always was; remarkable too is her clarity and elegance of diction.

By the end of the 1920s Miss Anderson seems to have reached full vocal and artistic maturity. In two recordings from the second act of Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila* (including the famous aria *Mon coeur s'ouvre a tà voix*), made in English in 1928 and 1930, we hear a great voice, more soprano than contralto, at once full and swordlike; in this combination of opulence and cutting power, the best comparison seems to be with the young Ljuba Welitsch in her perfor-

3 EMI EG 29 0016 1.

4 Pearl GEMM 193. Unlike the HMV and RCA reissues, sonically resplendent as they are in their filtering out of noises characteristic of the 78 RPM recording process, Pearl transfers are characterized by a minimum amount of processing, thus conveying to the listener a reasonably accurate account of how the original discs actually sounded.

5 RCA LM 2032. A further collection of spirituals, recorded in stereo and including titles not on the 1956 disc, was issued by RCA in 1962 on LSC-2592.

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mance, forty and more years ago, of the closing scene of Richard Strauss's *Salome*.[6] The rest of Miss Anderson's prewar recordings, ranging from impeccable Handel through deeply felt and projected Schubert *Lieder* to familiar spirituals, are stunning, too, and clearly justify her enormous impact on the international concert stage.

As Miss Anderson grew into full maturity, her voice gained in a typically alto warmth what it slowly lost in soprano brilliance. For me, the high point of her recordings made in the 1940s is her gripping and vocally glorious 1945 performance on the RCA CD of Brahms's *Alto Rhapsody* (a setting of the eloquent Goethe poem *Harzreise im Winter*) with Pierre Monteux and the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra; this beautiful work has the reputation of being an ugly duckling among Brahms's many swans, but on this occasion, through the miracle of performance, it is haunting and startling in its evocation of loneliness redeemed by hope.[7]

Throughout Miss Anderson's career she was the leading interpreter of Negro spirituals, that strange phenomenon of church singing transformed by a people's sadness. Her simple and noble singing of these songs moved millions, of every color, to tears. More than that, the spirituals suggested that the vicissitudes of history could be redeemed by the fulfillment of the ethical imperatives of the American founding. It seems irrelevant whether or not these spirituals were authentic expressions of her people's folk music; what is significant about them is that in Miss Anderson's performances, admirably preserved on the 1956 RCA LP, they became universal rather than particular, and in so becoming they achieved the status of high art. It is marvelous indeed that in a 1966 LP of Schubert and Brahms *Lieder*,[8] sung with diminished voice well after the end of her public career, this American singer took these gems of German culture and made of them as well something universal.

Finally, there is Marian Anderson the human being. Edward R. Murrow called his 1957 "See It Now" television program about her, focusing on a State Department-sponsored trip to the Orient, "The Lady from Philadelphia." With poise and grace she represented, abroad as at home, an evolving America, an America with problems, to be sure, but with a deep underlying sense of purpose and direction. She did so as an artist and as the holder of a deeply felt religious position. As Sol Hurok convincingly tells the story, when Miss Anderson asked her mother what gift she might want from her successful daughter, the reply, coming after much provocation from a sometimes hostile world, was simple: "All she wanted was that God would hold Marian Anderson 'in the hollow of his hand and raise up the people to be kind.'"

Marian Anderson was both an artist and an American leader. It is sad that the artists who have succeeded her have not been her equals as singers; it is tragic that the leaders who have succeeded her have not possessed her immense dignity.

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6 Three remarkable documentations of the Welitsch performance exist, and all, in their powerful security of voice and passionate intensity, are classics of the phonograph. The first, from 1944, was available on Seraphim 60202; the second, from 1949 and conducted by Fritz Reiner, was made after her sensational Metropolitan Opera debut in *Salome*, and was available on CBS-Odyssey 32 16 0078; the third is a pirate recording of a Met *Salome* broadcast with Welitsch and Reiner slightly later in 1949 and was available on discs cryptically described only as MRF-1.

7 A later and much less taut performance by Miss Anderson of the Brahms, conducted by Fritz Reiner, was issued in the early 1950s on the long-disappeared RCA LM-1146. It was coupled on this disc with Miss Anderson's affecting singing of the Mahler *Kindertotenlieder*, with Pierre Monteux and the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra.

8 RCA ARL1-3022, released in 1978. Mention should be made here of Franz Rupp, the splendid pianist on Miss Anderson's American recordings; her European recordings benefit from the collaboration of the equally splendid Kosti Vehanen.

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Photography

Questions about the vernacular

by David H. Wright

Among the exhibitions organized to celebrate the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of photography, there have been two travelling blockbuster surveys with ponderous catalogues that have inevitably dominated critical attention. Yet a smaller exhibition organized at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art proved in some respects a more original approach to the subject, and it raised questions about photography as an art form that were left largely unexplored in the bigger shows. Unfortunately, the San Francisco show had no catalogue and did not travel; it thus left no permanent record of its special focus on vernacular photography.

The first of the blockbusters, "The Art of Photography, 1839-1989," opened at Houston's Museum of Fine Arts in February and travelled to Canberra, Australia, before arriving at the Royal Academy in London this fall. The show included many familiar masterpieces, which were a pleasure to see, but on the whole it offered few revelations. It was organized primarily by Daniel Wolf, until recently a successful New York dealer in photographs, and it reeked of the chic gallery atmosphere associated with his name. The catalogue, except for being beautifully printed, is a perfect example of what an exhibition catalogue should not be.[1] Weighing slightly over six pounds, with "photographs sequenced by Daniel Wolf" and text edited by Mike Weaver of Oxford, its content seems to have been organized for educational television and its physical production for the coffee table. The photographs flow "nicely" in little groups that are interrupted at regular intervals by no less than fifteen snippets of text, each consisting of a two-page essay and a page of excerpts from a photographer or critic. Among the thirteen authorities on offer in these essays, only Peter Bunnell, writing on "Pictorial Effect," manages to say something coherent and helpful. This is a decorative non-book that is worthless as a guide to its subject.

The second blockbuster, "On the Art of Fixing a Shadow, One Hundred and Fifty Years of Photography," opened at the National Gallery in Washington in May; it travelled to Chicago in September, and will be in Los Angeles from Christmas through February of 1990. The title may sound precious, but it is legitimate, for it comes from William Fox Talbot's first account of his discovery in 1839. The exhibition was organized by two outstanding curators, David Travis in Chicago and Sarah Greenough in Washington, with the assistance of Joel Snyder and Colin Westerbeck in Chicago. They each contributed a major essay to the catalogue, dividing the history of photography into chronological periods at about 1880, 1918, and 1945. All of the essays are broad in scope and

1 *The Art of Photography, 1839-1989*, edited by Mike Weaver, was published by Yale University Press (472 pages, $50).

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thoughtful in content.[2] Even a well-informed reader is likely to find interesting new insight in this survey. For the number, quality, and range of work exhibited, the Chicago-Washington show takes all prizes.

The slightly smaller San Francisco exhibition, seen from February through April, was entitled "A History of Photography, from California Collections." It was organized by curator Sandra Phillips, who has recently arrived in San Francisco from New York. She set out deliberately to explore the less familiar California collections, both private and public. She kept her own museum's excellent collection in storage—while both blockbuster shows borrowed from it—and she displayed very few works from the state's leading museums. Instead, she turned to the state archives and historical museums, as well as to private collections that have been formed on specifically artistic criteria.

Although the show's title emphasized its local source, the San Francisco exhibition turned out to include most of the famous figures who were on display in the two blockbusters and who can also be found in the latest version of Beaumont Newhall's *History of Photography* (which itself began as an exhibition catalogue for New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1937). Like the bigger shows, the San Francisco exhibition affirmed the artistic character of the medium, particularly at both ends of its chronological spectrum. Representing the first generation of photographers were architectural views by Talbot, figure studies by Hill and Adamson, and lyrical seascapes by Gustave Le Gray; each of these photographers obviously and successfully applied ideas from contemporary painting. For the most recent work there were strong examples of Baldessari, Hockney, and Mapplethorpe. From a slightly earlier period there were examples of Arbus, Friedlander, Michals, and Winogrand, and the color photography of Eggleston and Meyerowitz.

This exhibition, it should be stressed, was an exhibition in a museum of modern art; its definition of photography as a modern artistic medium was fairly strict. Work in mixed media and photographs staged essentially for conceptual content were excluded. Photojournalism, as normally understood, was also excluded, and there was little work of a social documentary character. Yet within these limits, the exhibition gave a good account of the major artistic currents in photography over the past century. There was something of the pictorialist movement, a good representation of the development of abstraction by Paul Strand and Edward Weston, an excellent group of Surrealist works, and reasonable coverage of the Bauhaus and related German work. In short, the main lines were well represented.

What made the San Francisco show distinctive, however, was its coverage of the last part of the nineteenth century and some of the examples drawn from the first half of the twentieth century. Here the emphasis was on vernacular photography. These pictures were inserted, so to speak, into the art history of photography on the basis of a strictly contemporary point of view. The guiding assumption was that these generally anonymous photographs have precisely the kind of visual interest that allows us to consider them works of art even though we have no reason to suppose they were made for that purpose.

Some recognition of the vernacular is inevitable in any general history of early photography. Few daguerreotypes were made with any artistic pretensions, although some are of compelling historical interest. In this show, these included a portrait of Frederick Douglass and an 1851 panorama of San Francisco in seven relatively large plates. Amid the dozen more routine examples, one photograph particularly stood out: an anonymous ambrotype made around 1855 that shows a veteran of Waterloo posed with his wife. The aging

2 *On the Art of Fixing a Shadow, One Hundred and Fifty Years of Photography* was published in paperback by the National Gallery of Art and in hardcover by Bulfinch Press (510 pages, $75 in hardcover).

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man, dressed in a shabby suit and top hat but wearing his military medal, sits hunched forward, staring into the camera with a certain resignation; close by him his wife, apparently younger and stronger, dressed in her best bonnet, shawl, and leather gloves, holds her head up and looks at the camera almost disdainfully. We are stopped in our tracks by this powerful portrayal, even if we cannot imagine Ruskin or any other connoisseur of the time giving it a second glance. Thus, what was a clumsy unthinking pose in 1855 appears to us as the genius of naturally forthright expression. In a case like this there is no doubt that we are the richer for having discovered a very moving work of art.

Early artistic portraiture was represented in the San Francisco show by examples from the 1850s by Nadar and Roger Fenton. Fenton was a lawyer by training and a former art student who set out deliberately to establish himself as an artistic photographer. Even more interesting than their work was a portrait taken by Dr. Hugh Diamond in 1850. It shows an insane woman holding a dead bird. Diamond was Superintendent of Female Patients at the Surrey County Asylum and he was also a pioneer photographer. Although this picture was part of a scientific project, Diamond's handling of the pose, setting, and lighting is just as much derived from prevailing artistic conventions as the work of Fenton.

It was Julia Margaret Cameron, in the late 1860s, who defined the scope and power of artistic portraiture in photography. Her work was represented in the exhibition by some excellent examples, including familiar images of Sir John Herschel and Mrs. Duckworth. Although not so labeled in the show, one of these is properly entitled *A Beautiful Vision*, and reminds us that Cameron could add a larger range of meaning to her portraits without necessarily indulging in the Pre-Raphaelite sentimentality that characterized most of her allegorical work. For these portraits she moved close to the sitters and eliminated the elaborate settings and poses customary in painted portraits. She portrayed her friends forcefully and directly in a purely photographic style, thus setting a standard for everything that followed.

Aside from portraiture, the other main function of photography in its first decades was the documentation of architecture and exotic travel. In America this branch of photography certainly flourished. The show included some familiar examples of the genre: George Barnard's Ruins of the Railroad Depot at Charleston in 1866, William Henry Jackson at Yellowstone in 1870, and Timothy O'Sullivan at the Cañon de Chelly in 1873. More interesting as an example of the relation of the vernacular to high art, however, was the work of the California photographer Carleton Watkins.

Watkins came from Oneonta, New York, to San Francisco in 1851 at the age of twenty-two and worked as a shopkeeper, carpenter, and clerk until, by happenstance, he was hired as a photographer's assistant in 1854. He made a living as a portrait photographer in San Jose for the next few years, using first the daguerreotype and then the ambrotype process. By 1858 he had learned the collodion wet plate process and used it to make landscape photographs for court hearings on contested land claims. In court testimony that year, when asked how a particular view was chosen, he stated that he had "selected the spot which would give the best view."

By 1861 Watkins had perfected his technical skills and obtained a mammoth plate camera (eighteen by twenty-two inches) with a moderately wide-angle lens. On an expedition that summer he made some fifty views of Yosemite that were praised as revealing the majesty of God's handiwork; they were soon exhibited at Goupil's art gallery in New York and were used to help persuade Congress to set aside Yosemite as a national park. In view of the origin of these photographs, we would expect them to appear as strictly vernacular work, for Watkins had little education, no artistic training, and there was no museum

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or art collection in San Francisco at the time. Yet his intuition, reflected in his confident statement about "the best view," led him to develop a personal style that is unquestionably high art. His strong compositions are simply balanced, often symmetrical. They present God's handiwork with a forcefulness that may never have been surpassed.

The Watkins photographs in the San Francisco show were from a slightly later phase of his development; although somewhat more sophisticated than his earliest work, they are just as forthright in expressive effect. Similar landscape scenes by Muybridge—also in the show—are more dynamic and complex, but less powerful; similar scenes by the railroad photographers A. J. Russell and William H. Rau are as simple in composition, but not as strong in expression. Watkins stands out as a special case of a naïve genius. He was not even known to Beaumont Newhall when Newhall began his *History* in the 1930s, and he is treated only very briefly in the current edition of that work. And yet today Watkins is generally regarded as such an established classic that there may be some danger of taking him for granted—that is, of admiring his work without bringing to it a real understanding of the special circumstances of his artistic development.

A different relationship between the vernacular and high art emerges from another California example of a self-taught photographer. Arnold Genthe came to San Francisco from Hamburg in 1895 at the age of twenty-six. He had a Ph.D. in Classics and was soon engaged as a tutor to the son of a German baron and a San Francisco heiress.

Genthe fell in love with Chinatown, but when he looked for postcards to send home he considered them all too stiff and formal to convey the character of the community. He set out to learn photography from an instruction manual. He perfected his technique and frequented Chinatown for hours on end, patiently waiting for a revealing instant to record. Eventually he published over a hundred of his snapshots, as well as some more formal photographs.

If Genthe was self-taught in photography, he was thoroughly trained in the art of the Old Masters, and, more to the point, he was a cousin of Adolf von Menzel, Kaiser Wilhelm's favorite painter, and an intimate of that circle in Berlin. In his youth Genthe had even hoped to become a painter. What he achieved in his self-taught photography is the exact equivalent of Menzel's genre painting. *The Street of the Gamblers*, for example, the most complex composition of his Chinatown series, corresponds to a large Menzel canvas, while other photographs correspond to Menzel's innumerable sketches from life, which Genthe greatly admired. It was only in the mechanics of photographic technique, not in the larger purposes of art, that Genthe was self-taught.

Other examples of the vernacular in this exhibition raise questions of another kind. There was a page from a research album of the Salpétrière Clinic in Paris, dated 1882, showing a nude man first seated frontally and then in profile assuming three test postures as part of a study of hypertrophy. The page of colored paper, crumbling around the edges, has titles in formal French script and also shows a set of three drawings, apparently standards for the three test postures. The whole effect is uncanny. The names of the two photographers involved in this scientific project are recorded, but the "artist" in this instance is really the collector, Robert Shapazian, a scholar of modern French literature by training who has assembled a distinguished collection of Surrealist and constructivist photography. In the context of his special collection, this page becomes a work of art. Outside such a context, one can easily imagine that it would remain simply one step in a scientific investigation, a fugitive page better suited to a museum of history than a museum of art.

There are discoveries of this kind to be made even in quite recent times. For example, a photograph now in the California State Archives was taken in 1954 as part of an official report on a teacher-training program at UCLA. It shows a row

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of small children with paper bags over their heads, each holding a stick and feeling his way across a stretch of grass. The educational point is obvious. And yet, put this routinely made photograph in an art museum and we are reminded of Brueghel, or of the Surrealists. By looking at the photograph in this context, and by adding our own associations, it becomes, temporarily, a work of art. Here we are following the examples of the Surrealists, who used Atget's photographs as *objets trouvés*.

A different kind of collector's discovery in this exhibition was a true work of folk art. This was a page from a private album, circa 1920, with a nondescript photograph taken in the middle of an empty road; the photograph was, however, cut out in the shape of a five-point leaf and labeled "Road Across the Arizona Desert." The photograph itself is dumb, but the page is eloquent. It shows an unpaved road going straight through a flat, empty landscape; the leaf shape is asymmetrical—as if derived from a foreshortened photograph—and rotated at a forty-five-degree angle. Someone put imagination into the question of characterizing the desert. We can recognize and delight in that artistic thought without imposing our own associations on it.

Among the *objets trouvés* of the same collector, Gordon L. Bennett, were two cabinet cards by different commercial studios from around 1890. One shows a pile of animal tails, apparently the trophy of a trapper in the Dakota Territory after he had sold the pelts, the other a profile of a shoe with a small portrait superimposed where the ankle should be. The Dakota trapper would have been baffled to see his photograph in an art museum, but the folk artist of the shoe/portrait would have been pleased, and rightly so, for folk art does emanate from artistic intuition and the best examples of it deserve a museum showing. The pile of tails, by contrast, remains an *objet trouvé*. If André Breton had been the curator, we might have understood its inclusion, but in this more general context it is only marginally successful. Without that curatorial rationale, its appearance seems an act of whimsy. And not the only one in the show: there was also a tintype of an ear of corn leaning against a mirror, and a daguerreotype in a velvet-lined case depicting simply a monkey wrench. It is our modern scale of antiquarian values and imagination that is called into operation here.

Artistic claims for vernacular pictures can certainly be pushed too far. The problem was especially conspicuous with a San Quentin mug book for the years 1900-1, which was shown open in a vitrine. Photographs of three miscreants had been pasted onto each page, each appearing first in street clothes with his hat, then in street clothes without a hat, and finally in prison garb, flanked by slates giving name, number, date, charges, county, penalty, and place of birth. Here were men from Mexico, China, Germany, and Portugal. Here was a picture of a man of fifty-four from Vermont who had lost an eye and was condemned to death for murder in the first degree. This photograph was dated May 1, 1901, and in the margin was the annotation "Executed May 10th, 1901." These photographs are excellent technically, but it was for social history, not any artistic quality, that visitors lingered over the book.

The importance of the vernacular in photography remains a permanent issue. As he has revised his *History* over the years, Beaumont Newhall has gradually included more examples to make his historical coverage more complete. John Szarkowski took up the issue provocatively in his 1964 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, "The Photographer's Eye," but his was an aesthetic approach that begged many questions. Sarah Greenough takes up some of these issues in her section of the "On the Art of Fixing a Shadow" catalogue, but she emphasizes major artists who also practiced a kind of vernacular photography (such as Vuillard and Bonnard) or well-documented personalities (such as Queen Alexandra or the wealthy boy Jacques-Henri Lartigue). It was Sandra Phillips, in the San Francisco exhibition, who explored the issue more thoughtfully than I have seen elsewhere.

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Art

Wilmarth and Serra

by Eric Gibson

The Christopher Wilmarth retrospective that Laura Rosenstock organized for the Museum of Modern Art last summer was one of the high points in a season that had already seen some splendid moments.[1] The show was not perfect: only two of the seminal *Nine Clearings For a Standing Man* reliefs could be included, and the zigzag floor plan of the galleries impelled the viewer into a state of perpetual motion that militated against the sort of prolonged look the work demanded. Nonetheless, the show performed an important service. It brought into clear focus the achievements of an extremely gifted sculptor whose true stature has been in danger of being obscured owing both to his premature death by suicide in 1987 and to his uneasy relationship with the art market (during one period in his career, Wilmarth had no gallery affiliation for almost a decade). Among the major revelations of the Modern's exhibition, and of a concurrent show of works on paper in a gallery uptown,[2] was Wilmarth's skill as a draughtsman. His drawings have the same ambition as his sculpture and reach the same high level of accomplishment. It added a great deal to our understanding of both to be able to see them together.

Wilmarth was a Constructivist sculptor who made that idiom's language of open, industrial assemblage speak in a voice of poetic evocation. Early on he began using large sheets of glass—brushed with acid to "frost" them—in conjunction with heavy sheets of steel. He superimposed these two materials, or made them meet at an angle, and then joined them with a thin steel cable in a way that resembled sewing.

Glass became the aesthetic pivot upon which Wilmarth's sculptural effects turned. Frosted, it seemed more substantial than it did when transparent, closer to its companion material, steel. Yet, paradoxically, that very transformation seemed to dematerialize the glass by enabling it to capture and diffuse light. The result was something new in sculpture, an atmospheric space in which light "sounded" the emotional keynote. Wilmarth's work combined the sculptor's interest in tangible form with the painter's love of transfiguration and illusion.

As it happened, MOMA's Wilmarth retrospective took place against a backdrop of continuing controversy over another sculptor, Richard Serra. In March, Serra's *Tilted Arc*, the celebrated site-specific work in lower Manhattan, was removed after the last of the artist's legal appeals failed. In May, when the Wilmarth show opened, the

1 "Christopher Wilmarth" was on view at the Museum of Modern Art from May 25 to August 22. A catalogue, written by Laura Rosenstock, is available at the museum bookstore, in paper, for $8.95.

2 "Christopher Wilmarth, Drawings: 1963-1987" was shown at Hirschl & Adler Modern from June 1 to August 19. An illustrated catalogue that included three statements by the artist was available in paperback for $15.

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magazine *Art in America* gave Serra its cover and plenty of room inside to restate, yet again and with the usual overblown rhetoric, his arguments against dismantling the piece. ("The governmental decree to remove and thereby destroy *Tilted Arc* is the direct outcome of a cynical Republican cultural policy that only supports art as a commodity.") And *The New York Times* kept stoking the fire by running letters on the subject well into the summer.

Nor was that all. As if in relay, just as the *Tilted Arc* debate showed signs of finally dying out a new Serra contretemps erupted, this time in New Haven. Some time ago, the Yale University Art Gallery commissioned *Stacks*, another of Serra's site-specific works. The installation of *Stacks* required clearing the Art Gallery's Medieval Sculpture Hall of its exhibits, a change that was not well received in all quarters of the university. (Serra himself, it should be noted, is an illustrious alumnus of the Yale School of Art.) On this occasion, however, Serra's patrons had the good sense to experiment with a full-scale plywood mock-up before proceeding with the project itself. After the mock-up drew fire that might otherwise have shot down the finished work, the Art Gallery decided to go ahead. The installation is scheduled for December.

This chance conjunction of two such different sculptors proved illuminating. For one thing, it turned out that they have more in common than one had supposed. Born within four years of each other—Serra in 1939 and Wilmarth in 1943—they matured in time to have their artistic ideas shaped by Minimalism, which made itself felt in each artist's tendency to favor reductive geometries and to place his sculpture in the "real" space of the viewer. And both artists arrived at their signature styles at roughly the same moment. Serra made his first "prop pieces" in 1969: in these sculptures interdependent elements lean or balance against one another—for example, a sheet of lead might be held in place on a wall by the pressure of another lead sheet, this one rolled up. Wilmarth first used glass two years earlier. Although both sculptors worked in metal, neither welded.

Perhaps most important, both Wilmarth and Serra constructed their work out of large, barely inflected planes combined in a way that stressed physical properties (surface, area, planarity, weight, delicacy) over structure. While both artists' work acknowledged a Cubist heritage, their compositional model wasn't the Cubist grid but something closer to a house of cards, where planes touch at the edges rather than intersect. (One of Serra's prop pieces is called *House of Cards*.) The viewer is made aware of their planes as semi-independent entities—and in some cases as totally independent entities—rather than as parts of an architectonic structure.

This similarity of syntax only underscores the deep differences between these artists. From one (Serra), it yields sculpture that is physically assertive and aggressively engaged with the viewer and the surrounding space. From the other (Wilmarth), it produces a deferential and introverted art of feeling in which plastic values exist with optical ones, all at a certain discreet psychological distance from the spectator.

In the opposition between Wilmarth and Serra, we have something of a replay of the old Renaissance dichotomy between the active and contemplative life. The essence of Serra's work consists in making certain physical operations fundamental to forming or building the "subject" of his sculpture: splashing molten lead into a corner (*Splashing*, 1968); tearing sheets of lead (*Tearing Lead*, 1968); stacking (the *Skullcracker Series* of 1969); leaning (the prop pieces of the late Sixties), and so on. This approach to making sculpture led the critic Robert Pincus-Witten to observe that while Minimalist sculpture grew out of the repeatable module—the cube, say—Serra's had its roots in the grammar of action, or, as Pincus-Witten put it, in the "verb." This attitude, plus an interest in expressing the structural properties of his materials, led Serra to make precarious assemblages where sheets of steel

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or lead were poised on the brink of collapse, held in place only by the weight of one element against another.

By relying on gravity and inertia rather than a welding torch, Serra stripped assembled sculpture of its characteristic stasis and architectonic illusionism. It became more "real." A cantilever in a Serra is a real cantilever; the viewer experiences vividly the interplay of weight, balance, and extension among the parts. Serra also made sculpture a kind of paradox: a work aesthetically complete and yet one that was also an ongoing process occurring in real time. ("Process art," in fact, was the name given to art of this kind in the Sixties.) The elements continued to lean against and support one another for the duration of the sculpture's public existence. Finally, the innate precariousness of the work introduced a new twist to the subject of tactility in sculpture. Whereas carved and modeled sculpture might invite the viewer's touch, the instability cultivated by Serra discouraged it. If anything, Serra's pieces threatened to touch the viewer, and in a most violent way—by collapsing on him. All this made Serra's work more alive than the most animated kinetic sculpture.

If Serra speaks in the active voice, then Wilmarth speaks in the passive. In place of Serra's intensity and deliberateness, there is to Wilmarth's work a quiet, understated air. With Serra's work, we are made aware of the calculation that has gone into its elements because of the way they tease the laws of physics. By contrast, the straightforwardness of Wilmarth's sculptures—a sheet of glass placed in front of a sheet of steel, for example—can make them seem like afterthoughts, happy accidents (although nothing could be further from the truth, of course). For Serra, connections to the real world—to time, to actual space, to the physical properties of material, to the process of making sculpture—are the essence of a sculptor's work; for Wilmarth, they are only part of the story. Because of Serra's interest in the structural capabilities of his materials, he assigns to each element only one "value" (supporting, leaning, etc.). Wilmarth's elements have multiple values. Glass, brittle and delicate, stands on edge with the apparent strength of steel. The cable that knits a work together or supports it on a wall functions graphically, as a line inscribed across a plane surface. Whereas process is essential to Serra's work, it only plays a secondary role in Wilmarth's. We can imaginatively reconstruct Wilmarth's actions in cutting or bending his steel sheets, but for the most part the experience isn't central to the work's aesthetic ambition.[3] In fact, the major impetus in Wilmarth is to escape the real world that Serra insistently returns us to. Wilmarth's materials are vehicles for a state of reverie where time has less to do with artistic process than with the suspended dream time of Mallarmé, a poet Wilmarth greatly admired.

The opposition between active and passive manifests itself elsewhere. Serra's notion of site-specific sculpture, in which the work articulates the characteristics of the site, is intended to transform his sculpture from a decorative object into a work of art capable of making its location "vibrate." It presupposes a dialogue between sculpture and surrounding space. This is even true of the smaller, gallery-scaled sculptures that are not site-specific. Thus, Serra's spatial conception is environmental, engaged. Wilmarth's is self-effacing and introspective. Although the space that exists between steel and glass planes is important to Wilmarth's plastic concerns, it serves mainly as a foil for an illustionistic space that exists *within* the work. Pictorial, intangible, it is located

3 Two exceptions in the exhibition were *Untied Drawing* (1971) and *Lace* (1972). These are small, flat wall works in which two or three sheets of superimposed glass are knitted together with lengths of Wilmarth's trademark cable, making in the former a linear zigzag pattern and in the latter a simple square. In both works the cable constitutes a kind of "drawn" image. And as we read that image, we reconstruct the artist's act of interlacing the pieces of steel cable.

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somewhere both in and behind the translucent glass.

Serra wants the viewer to step into his altered, often disquieting, literal space and to become aware of himself in doing so. Wilmarth's sculpture opens up a space into which the viewer can imaginatively project, even lose, himself. This is the idea of his *Clearings*. In a 1977 statement that is reprinted in the catalogue to the drawings show, Wilmarth speaks of having been "always on the lookout for a place with the light just so and the colors right . . . and if I was quiet . . . I would become transparent and be part of the place I was in." Wilmarth's sculptures are humanistic; they affirm the centrality of the individual, his integrity in relation to the world, his sense of having a place in it. Serra's work, even when it is not colossal, has an overwhelming presence. It imposes itself on the viewer, dominating his space and undermining his sense of well-being with its threat of collapse. Instead of feeling affirmed, the viewer feels exiled and at risk.

Some writers on Wilmarth have made the point that his sculpture is urban in character. References to the Brooklyn Bridge, for example, appear in some of his titles. But the experience Wilmarth offers is really pastoral. It has more to do with the kind of spiritual relief and amplitude possible only in nature. Serra's is the real urban sculpture: in its shifting angles and perspectives, its abrupt foreshortenings and extensions, its sharp compressions and releases of space, and in the tension it imposes on its environment and the viewer. Space for Wilmarth is luminous, tranquil, expansive. For Serra space is a medium under pressure. No doubt this is part of the reason that Serra has run into trouble as a public artist. His work reinforces the uneasiness, constriction, and uncertain rhythm of contemporary urban living.

On first acquaintance, the drawings of these two artists seem remarkably different. Serra's drawings consist of an all-over, uniform layer of black paintstick on paper. In size, they approach paintings, but the density of the black marking gives them the visual weight of his sculptures. They hang directly on the wall in a way that makes them function as sculptures, as planes engaged in some act of space-manipulating balance or suspension. A long rectangular drawing, for example, will have a short side flush with the room's corner and appear to be cantilevered from the wall.

Compared with Serra's, Wilmarth's drawings are more orthodox. The ones we have seen are of two types, in two different media. In one, graphite on paper, a faint, tendril-like scaffold of lines supports an equally faint grey parallelogram. They are ghostly, weightless images that spread across an entire sheet. Without a nearby sculpture to orient us, we would be hard-pressed to understand that the parallelogram is an oblique view of Wilmarth's frosted glass, while the faint lines describe its supporting structure of steel.

Wilmarth's other drawings are altogether different and have a more readily recognizable relationship to his sculptures. This is not surprising, for they are drawings from existing works. The images are hard-edged, centered on the page, and delicately colored with grey and green watercolor wash. Their flatness and simplicity ensure that they function equally as descriptions of existing sculptures and as independent abstractions.

In these drawings, Wilmarth uses colors to indicate the different materials of his sculpture, and any mixing of colors or change in individual values denotes the imposition of one plane on another. Thus the greener bottom half of *Beginning* (1973) signals the presence of a second, smaller steel plane in front of a larger one. The overlapping of areas of grey and green wash in *Edge of Gnomon #2* (1975) stands for a similar relationship between steel and glass planes. Wilmarth's marks in these drawings thus correspond directly to a specific part of a sculpture.

Taking this idea to its logical conclusion, Wilmarth will, in certain drawings—*Edge of Gnomon #2* among them—excise a shape, such as a triangle, from an area previously

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covered in watercolor, and then back the cut drawing with a clean white sheet. The action amounts to a kind of negative collage—or, perhaps, some mix of collage and the Matisse of the *découpages*. Instead of attaching scraps of paper to a background sheet, Wilmarth cuts into a sheet already painted and superimposes it upon another. This second sheet remains invisible but for the area revealed by the cutout. The effect is dramatic. Next to the painted areas around it, the exposed white of the background sheet reads neither as blankness nor as color but as matter dematerialized by a brilliant light. What we are looking at is the counterpart in drawing of a sculpture's irradiated glass sheet.

Wilmarth's concern in these drawings, then, is to convey in two dimensions the effects he achieves in three. The watercolors' precise modulation of tone and Wilmarth's use of the white page to suggest light duplicate his sculptures' innate pictorialism, while the accumulated layers of watercolor wash and the superimposed sheets of paper are graphic equivalents of his sculpture's planar relations.

Sculptors draw for many reasons, of course: to work out ideas; to jot down a thought that they may never have time to execute; to record the appearance of a finished sculpture; even to create an independent aesthetic object. Wilmarth's cutting into the sheet shows that his drawings are more than supports for mark-making or fields for an image; they are plastic entities in their own right, capable of being "shaped" like a sheet of steel. Serra, too, wants drawing to function sculpturally, which is why, finally, Wilmarth and Serra do have something in common as draughtsmen. Serra does not cut into his sheets of paper, but the effects that result from his all-over handling of pigment and his calculated placement of his finished drawings suggest that he has the same end in mind—perhaps even more than Wilmarth, since Serra's drawings, while not sculptures themselves, achieve the effect of sculptures.

Somehow, one is not so surprised to find a blending of artistic forms in Wilmarth's work. Like his drawings, his sculpture straddles the sculptural and graphic realms. Some sculptural works—*Untied Drawing* and *Lace*, for example—are "drawings" in the same sense that *Edge of Gnomon #2* is a "sculpture." Each mode exists in a kind of aesthetic halfway house. But to find Serra working this way comes as a surprise. The success of his drawings depends on something which his sculptures eschew, and of which the artist himself has spoken disparagingly: illusion. In his drawings, Serra, so different from Wilmarth in some respects, finds common ground in his recourse to one of the oldest tools of the artist.

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Dance

Kirovmania in New York

by Eva Resnikova

Like orphans about to meet their long-lost cousins from the Old Country, New Yorkers reared on Balanchine awaited the arrival of the Kirov Ballet full of vague hopes of gaining new insights into a common classical heritage. This first visit to New York in a quarter century of the artistic descendants of the company that had launched Balanchine seemed to hold out the promise of a renewal of the language that has so sadly languished in the absence of its greatest exponent.

When the much-anticipated event took place, however, we were dismayed to discover that, far from being the elegant and stylish sophisticates we had imagined, our kinsmen wore polyester suits, tucked their napkins under their chins, and slurped their soup. At a certain point it became depressingly clear that there were no revelations to be gleaned from our end, that, indeed, any possible benefits would accrue to the visitors.

This realization did not sink in with finality until the second of the Kirov's three weeks at the Met and the heartbreaking revelation of its *Sleeping Beauty*. The season had opened on July 3 on a lighter note with a colorful production of Petipa's *Le Corsaire*, loosely based on the numerous revisions of his 1858 staging. Besides offering lead roles for two ballerinas and two danseurs, the main attraction of this exercise in high kitsch was the plausible setting it provided for the disconnected fragments of presumably authentic Petipa that have slowly filtered west over the years: the Pas de Deux (actually, it turns out, a pas de trois), the Pas d'Esclave, and Le Jardin Animé. As a bonus, this full-length *Corsaire* introduced an unfamiliar Petipa jewel in the form of classical variations for a trio of Odalisques.

Though the staging was filled with inconsistencies both dramatic and musical—the score is a salmagundi of no fewer than five composers, the most distinguished of whom are Adolphe Adam and Léo Delibes—it's hard getting exercised over such patent silliness. Then, too, on first viewing the sophisticated Western ballet goer could not be blamed for assuming the whole thing was intended as a send-up. But send-up requires a capacity for irony that, it later became clear, is not to be found in the Kirov lexicon.

The *Giselle* that followed was the most consistently successful production of the tour. Like all Soviet versions of classic story ballets, it suffered from the loss of its traditional-mime sequences, which have been replaced by irritating charades. Thus Berthe's warning of the consequences of Giselle's over-exertion is reduced to her pointing at the ground and Giselle assuming the Wili pose—arms folded on chest, back leg extended on the ground—as ominous-sounding music swells in the background. On the other hand, when naturalistic acting is called for, as in Giselle's mad scene, the Kirov dancers throw themselves into their

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task with alacrity. The same incapacity for irony that leads them to take seriously the shipwrecked pirates and maidens sold into white slavery of *Le Corsaire* lends to their depiction of Giselle's mental deterioration a sense of conviction rarely encountered among American dancers, who so often seem embarrassed when required to come down off their pointes and emote.

The sudden refusal following their second *Corsaire* of the company's two stellar attractions, Altynai Asylmuratova and Farukh Ruzimatov, to have anything further to do with each other threw the entire season's casting into disarray. One happy result of this display of star temperament was the previously unscheduled Giselle of the twenty-two-year-old Zhanna Ayupova. With her rounded contours and delicate features, she is the image of the Romantic ballerina as idealized in nineteenth-century lithographs. But her Giselle is no period piece; there are none of the "touching 'Victorianisms'" that Edwin Denby noted in the Giselle of Alicia Markova in the Forties, and which could still be glimpsed in that of Kirov alumna Natalia Makarova in the Seventies and Eighties. Ayupova was a believably love-struck teenager in the first act, with a mad scene touching in its simplicity. Her step-perfect second act was lacking only in the elusive qualities that will no doubt come with experience and maturity.

Ayupova's triumph was all the more remarkable in that her Albrecht was the narcissistic, ill-mannered Ruzimatov, a dancer of grandiloquent manner and meretricious technique. With his narrow hips and shoulders, sallow complexion, hook nose, heavy-lidded eyes rimmed with kohl and caked with shadow, and mouth hanging open like a fish's, he cuts an unintentionally ridiculous figure. When he walks he manages somehow simultaneously to strut and to swish. (In a 1930s movie musical he would be played by Erik Rhodes. Come to think of it, he *was* played by Erik Rhodes, as the insufferably self-important primo ballerino Konstantine Morrosine in *On Your Toes*.) Ruzimatov is a shameless scene stealer, drawing attention to himself during Giselle's solo by standing downstage left in a fully turned-out fifth position, seemingly ready to pounce. He delays his entrances in order to heighten anticipation, and he does not deign to allow his cabrioles to deteriorate as an indication of Albrecht's growing exhaustion. As a parting insult, Ruzimatov ended not by collapsing in grief on Giselle's grave but by disappearing into the wings at the crest of a triumphant grand jeté.

Asylmuratova's Giselle the following evening—partnered by a deferential Konstantin Zaklinsky, her husband in real life—was more mature and sophisticated than Ayupova's, even incongruously glamorous. Her mad scene was grand-operatic in the range and intensity of its emotion, more chilling than touching: she grimaced in inner pain, clutched at her heart, sank wearily to the ground; wild-eyed, she shook with hysterical silent laughter. It was a far cry from the "pretty death" indicated by Théophile Gautier, the librettist. But this was a Giselle who came to dramatic life only in fits and starts, punctuated by numerous dead spots. Asylmuratova has not yet learned how to imbue pure-dance passages with drama. Though she appears to be innately musical, she fails to exploit the rhythmic drama in the music. At times she even worked at cross-purposes to it, holding balances beyond their natural cut-off and performing a diagonal of travelling hops on pointe at breakneck speed, as if her first-act variation were part of a bravura pas de deux rather than a ballet d'action.

It did not help that the conducting was surely the most erratic ever to issue from the podium at the Metropolitan Opera House. But at the Kirov, it is the accepted practice that the conductor follow the lead of the solo dancer—a perverse set-up from which no rhythmic drama can emerge. "In art as in everything else," wrote Stravinsky, "one can build only upon a resisting foundation; whatever constantly gives way to pressure constantly renders movement impossible." "A choreographer can't invent rhythms,"

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Balanchine wrote, "he only reflects them in movement." The best prescription for what ails Asylmuratova at this point in her career, and one that she would no doubt find distasteful, is a large dose of Balanchine, which would force her to discover the drama in steps and their relation to the music, without resort to story or character.

The real glory of the Kirov's *Giselle* lay in the second-act female corps de ballet, which was an active force in the drama rather than merely a decorative diversion or a frame for the soloists. These Wilis danced with a vigor befitting their status as avenging angels. In one wonderfully demonic image, they surround Hilarion and literally run headlong in circles around him. Later, lined up on the diagonal with their implacable queen at their head, the Wilis seemed to propel their victim toward his fate with a peristaltic wave, like a snake that has swallowed a mouse. The Kirov has revitalized this masterpiece of the Romantic Age by classicizing it: there were no droopy arms or mincing little toe steps from among these robust young peasant girls dead before their time and bent on revenge. It may not be authentic, but it works.

And then came the debacle of *The Sleeping Beauty*.

Though the Kirov had its apologists among the New York press, most of the critics reacted in rare unanimity with a passion that must have taken the visitors by surprise. The Kirov's neglect, even abuse, of this precious legacy, which is also ours once removed, struck many as a personal affront. Whereas the company had deemed *Le Corsaire* worthy of a lavish new production, it was content to offer us a warmed-over touring version of the 1952 Konstantin Sergeyev *Sleeping Beauty*. Simon Virsaladze was responsible for the shabby décor and tacky costumes, including derisible wigs. No one took public responsibility for the dour and amateurish lighting, which favored garish follow-spots—green for Carabosse, purple for the Lilac Fairy, one or the other for any unfortunates who happened to stray into their auras.

Unsatisfying even in its entirety (which can be seen in the 1983 videotape featuring Irina Kolpakova), this revised Sergeyev *Sleeping Beauty* was further mangled with cuts and alterations: no children in the Garland Waltz, which made nonsense of the choreography, now reduced to background balancés in place and garlands framing thin air; no dances at all for the peasants or the courtiers in the second act, who were left with only a piece of shtick involving a game of darts; no panorama; entire numbers gone from the wedding act, as well as nips and tucks in what remained. Did they think no one would notice? Incredibly, a tiresome and unnecessary mimed scene involving the royal couple and some knitters was added to the opening of the first act—something that could bring pleasure only to the dancers stuck in these roles.

The purveyors of this production seem to have gone out of their way to drain the story of its theatricality. Needless to say, the mime speeches depicting Carabosse's curse and the Lilac Fairy's reprieve were excised, the former replaced with some unintelligible goings-on in an upstage corner involving a little girl hurriedly acting out Aurora's prophesied death, the latter with a series of meaningless arabesques. For some unfathomable reason, the disguised Carabosse offers Aurora not a naked spindle but a bouquet in which a knitting needle has been hidden, like the asp in the basket of flowers in *La Bayadère*. In the original, we are shown how the King's attempt to evade Carabosse's curse by banning spindles from his kingdom actually plays into her hands: because Aurora has never seen a spindle, she is oblivious to its danger, regarding it as a fascinating toy and dancing gaily about with it as her horrified parents look on, afraid to intervene, until the inevitable occurs. In the Kirov's version, Aurora's parents have rudely turned their backs on their daughter and are about to walk offstage when she pricks her finger on the hidden knitting needle. This theatrical insensitivity continues into the next act, which concludes with the most perfunctory of wake-up kisses.

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Even in a production of *The Sleeping Beauty* as dismal as the Kirov's, the transparency of Petipa's choreography allows it to serve as window on a company's classical style and technique. The Kirov offered five Auroras and four Lilacs, of which I saw four and three, respectively, begging off only for the Aurora of Galina Mezentseva, a senior ballerina of anorectic thinness who is much admired in her home base but whom I find painful to watch.

Yelena Pankova was the somewhat brittle first-night Aurora. The following evening Asylmuratova gave another of her performances full of lovely bits that failed to add up to a whole. The nakedness of Aurora's choreography also exposed flaws in Asylmuratova's technique, notably a deeply swayed back that makes her bottom stick out from under the frou-frous of her tutu like a skater's. Long years of compensating for off-center placement have left her with chunky thighs and sharply angular calf muscles. Her feet are pretty, if underdeveloped, a weakness that is shared by all the Kirov girls and makes for bumpy risings to and lowerings from pointe. Asylmuratova has a beautiful face and upper body, which she exploits in the most calculating manner. Her first-act Aurora was full of coy over-the-shoulder glances at the audience and a pasted-on teeth-baring smile worthy of a commercial for dentifrice.

Ayupova's Aurora the following night confirmed the promise of her Giselle. Unlike Asylmuratova, Ayupova has no ballerina airs. Her first-act Aurora was shy rather than coy, and she used her solid technique to underline the robustness of healthy adolescence rather than the status of prima ballerina. Ayupova's vision scene was reminiscent of the second act of her Giselle; indeed, the lack of maturity that diminished the tragic dimension of her Wili served her well as the conjured image of the enchanted princess. (Asylmuratova played the vision scene *souffrante*.) Ayupova's was also the only Aurora who underwent a palpable change from the unripe teenager of the first act to the awakened young woman of the third. The radiance of Tatiana Terekhova, the final Aurora, is the warm glow of maturity rather than the heat of youth.

As the Lilac Fairy, Mezentseva was an eyesore. When she lifted her bony legs in the développés-tombés of the Prologue waltz, she made it seem an obscene gesture. Lyubov Kunakova performed them mechanically, as if they were a schoolroom exercise. The sturdy young Yulia Makhalina is the Kirov ballerina who most resembles an American in the athleticism of her technique; she will be a fine Lilac when she learns to temper her strength with delicacy. The Princes of Konstantin Zaklinsky, Yevgeni Neff, and Kirill Melnikov all fit the Kirov's standard danseur-noble specifications: tall, well built, gracious in manner, and dull; all exhibit the same faults of desultory turnout, slack knees, and unpointed toes. The very young Melnikov, yanked from the corps to substitute for a purportedly ailing Ruzimatov, distinguished himself with a technical precision for which, if the progress of his elders is any indication, one fears.[1]

The final week of the season was devoted to mixed bills of excerpts and short ballets, culminating in a long-awaited experiment in cultural glasnost: the presentation by the Kirov in his adopted hometown of two ballets by native son and former dreaded formalist George Balanchine.

First, though, there was more Petipa. It was the Kirov that, in 1961, revealed to the West the Kingdom of the Shades scene from *La Bayadère*, with its hypnotic entry of thirty-two corps de ballet girls in a snaking line, and it was Kirov defectors who later set it on Western companies: Rudolf Nureyev on the Royal Ballet and Natalia Makarova on

1 There is one aspect of the Kirov's *Sleeping Beauty* that Western companies would do well to emulate: the use of the piano in the third act, as specified by the composer. Outside the Soviet Union the piano is routinely replaced by harp, even in recordings. On the significance of the piano in *The Sleeping Beauty*, see my review of Roland John Wiley's *Tchaikovsky's Ballets* in the January 1986 issue of *The New Criterion*.

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American Ballet Theatre. The brisk pace at which the Kirov's Shades enter is probably more authentic than the mannerism of Makarova's drawn-out adagio, but this is one case in which her exaggerated tempo seems justified, in order to create for today's jaded audiences the startling effect of the original. The andante clip of the Kirov's procession made it seem mechanical, even soldierly; there was not time for the deliberate placing of the extended foot and the luxurious stretching through the entire body of the arabesque allongée. The high point of this *Bayadère* was the variations for solo Shades. The first elicited the best dancing yet from Irina Chistyakova, who seems to have inherited from the great pedagogue Agrippina Vaganova the title "queen of variations"; the third, not top-drawer Petipa and bottom-of-the-barrel Minkus, received from Ayupova its best performance in my experience.

The Kirov has retained the original title of *Chopiniana* for the Fokine ballet that Diaghilev brought west in 1909 as *Les Sylphides*. The version performed by the Kirov is the one "restaged" by Vaganova in 1928. Surprisingly, the clichés of Romantic style that the company so successfully avoided in *Giselle* assert themselves with a vengeance in the Romantic-pastiche *Chopiniana*. (At one point the reclining corps de ballet performed hula motions with their arms accompanied by chin waggings.) This is a ballet whose reputed charms have always escaped me, beginning with the orchestrations by many hands of Chopin's piano pieces; and though there was some nice dancing from Ayupova and two up-and-coming corps de ballet dancers, Irina Sitnikova and Natalya Pavlova, the Kirov's performance did little to alter my jaundiced view.

The program that opened with *Chopiniana* also brought us the Minkus-Petipa Grand Pas from *Paquita* and a potpourri under the misleading rubric "Classical Pas de Deux," which consisted neither exclusively, nor even largely, of pas de deux and included choreography that one would be hard-pressed to describe as classical, such as Fokine's *Dying Swan*. The doomed waterfowl was impersonated by Mezentseva; the best that can be said of it is that the stage was very dark. A swan of a different feather was Makhalina as a no-nonsense Odette in the adagio from *Swan Lake*. Though she is technically powerful, it is puzzling, given the Kirov's entrenched system of personal coaches, how a ballerina could get this far and still be permitted to commit a solecism like petits battements on the cou de pied with the foot waggling in the air. (These small tappings of the raised foot on the ankle of the other leg are said to represent the fluttering of Odette's heart.)

A trio from the Legat brothers' 1903 *Fairy Doll* was cloyingly sweet. That warhorse of the fouetté circuit, the *Don Quixote* pas de deux, marked the return to the land of the healthy of Ruzimatov, finally in a role in which his preening manner seemed not entirely inappropriate, though from his sullen mien one would hardly have guessed that he was supposed to be celebrating his marriage. Pankova was a tough cookie of a Kitri who nevertheless stood little chance of stealing any of the spotlight from her partner.

The entry of greatest interest in this potpourri was the unfamiliar Pas de Six from *La Esmeralda*, with Asylmuratova as the titular gypsy.[2] Based on Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Perrot's 1844 ballet was extensively revised in 1886 by Petipa as a vehicle for the supreme dancer-actress Virginia Zucchi. In the excerpt presented by the Kirov, Esmeralda and her gypsy girlfriends have been hired to provide the entertainment at a party that turns out to be celebrating the betrothal of the man she really loves. She has already married, out of pity, another man, also present. Asylmura-

2 When the Kirov performed *La Esmeralda* in Paris in 1982, it was credited solely to Vaganova, with no mention of Petipa; at the Met, Petipa was accorded sole credit, with Vaganova's name nowhere to be found. Presumably what we saw was Vaganova's staging of Petipa's revisions of Perrot.

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tova wonderfully conveyed Esmeralda's swirling emotions as she goes through her enforced paces, though their rationale would remain inscrutable to anyone who had not done research into the story of this obscure ballet. (The printed program offers no help in this department.) When Kunakova took over the role the following night, it became dull and academic. Asylmuratova also provided the only spark in an otherwise mostly uninspiring *Paquita* with a miniature variation to bell-like tones, though it was somewhat disconcerting to see all her spontaneous-seeming effects reproduced with meticulous precision the following night.

Alternating with "Classical Pas de Deux" as the central portion of the mixed bills was a selection of works under the ominous heading of "Contemporary Choreography." There is no point going into the gruesome details of these pitiable attempts at catching up with seven decades of dance history that have passed the Soviet Union by, including the entire history of modern dance. Suffice it to say that these exercises in floor-rolling and partner-grappling were as devoid of rhythmic interest as the music to which they were set: undistinguished native product, imported pop trash, and the most hackneyed of Western art music (the "Bachiana Brasileira" No. 5; the Albinoni "Adagio"), as if Soviet choreographers' only source of serious music were a mark-down bin of greatest-hits close-outs. I would add only that no mere verbal description can do justice to the true awfulness of these works, which must be seen to be believed.

What does it mean when a company that seeks to perform Balanchine perpetrates horrors such as "Contemporary Choreography" in the name of modern ballet? The answer can be found in the nomenclature. The great stylistic schism at the Kirov used to be Romantic versus Classical; now it is Classical versus Contemporary. If something is Classical, it cannot be Contemporary; if it is Contemporary, it cannot be Classical. Balanchine is Classical; therefore he cannot be Contemporary.

We like to believe that New York City Ballet and the Kirov are sisters under the skin, and that in seeking out Balanchine's choreography the Kirov had finally come to value him as we do, as the Great Modernist. The reality, however, is different. The Soviets admire Balanchine as they admire Petipa, and they regard both as historical figures. To most of the Kirov dancers, Balanchine is strictly history. Asylmuratova remarked to an American observer in Leningrad: "I have seen very little of Balanchine's work. He was here once in person, you know, but that was about a hundred years ago."[3] (He was there in 1962 and 1972.) To her and other dancers of her generation, Balanchine's choreography is basically the same as Petipa's, only harder. It's not surprising that the ballet mistresses charged with setting the Balanchine works on the Kirov—Suzanne Farrell for *Scotch Symphony,* Francia Russell for *Theme and Variations*—encountered initial suspicion, resentment, and hostility from the dancers and their omnipresent personal coaches, anxious not to allow their charges to be seen to less than full advantage.

On the final day of the Kirov's season at the Met, after three weeks of stodgy Soviet fare, Balanchine's limpid choreography, even in less than state-of-the-art performances, was like a palate-cleansing sherbet. When the curtain went up on *Scotch Symphony* and the couples of the ensemble began dancing, the first thing you noticed was that you hadn't before seen any extended dancing from the boys of the corps de ballet, which goes a long way toward explaining the dispiritedness and general technical weakness of the Kirov men. Also remarkable was the fact that, for the most part, the conductor seemed to be taking his tempos from Mendelssohn rather than the solo dancers, faltering only in the final Allegro maestoso, which emerged more dirgelike than majestic.

Mezentseva, stiffly partnered by Neff, was the matinee sylph, and though it couldn't be called a pretty sight, at least she had the good

3 Quoted in Nancy Reynolds, "Setting Balanchine in Leningrad," *Ballet Review*, Summer 1989, p. 42.

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sense to abandon her usual air of *la grande tragédienne* and approach the role in an objective manner. It was the evening performance that provided the revelation, as Pankova, heretofore so unremarkable, blossomed in the rich soil of Balanchine's choreography. A colorless routinier suddenly revealed unsuspected gifts of lyricism and musicality: her stiffness melted away before our eyes; the pained-ballerina look was replaced by a luminous countenance reflecting genuine joy in movement and music. Dancing opposite Pankova was a somewhat nervous young corps de ballet dancer of dashing good looks and clean line named Yuri Zhukov, who might develop into a fine dancer if he manages to avoid falling prey to the Kirov danseur-noble syndrome.

As the kilted girl, Chistyakova threw herself into her opening variation with such enthusiasm that at the matinee she landed on her bottom—a good sign, though the fact that she fell backward rather than forward illustrates the Kirov girls' tendency to dance with the weight over the heels, making it virtually impossible to perform Balanchine's intricate footwork with the requisite swiftness and lightness.[4] In the final moments of the ballet, with the corps couples providing multiple reflections of the sylph and her partner, the stars were given a spotlight, proving that old habits die hard at the Kirov, especially when they concern hierarchy.

Theme and Variations is Balanchine's Petipa-Tchaikovsky for twentieth-century eyes, and the Kirov dancers' inability to penetrate its mystery confirms that on the eve of the twenty-first century, they're still stuck back in the nineteenth. The mystery of *Theme and Variations*, of course, is that there is none. As Balanchine was fond of saying, "Just do the steps." The corollary is that there is no place to hide in this ballet. A dancer like Ruzimatov is exposed as the possessor of a shallow and limited technique capable of only the grossest effects, cloaked in a mantle of mystique. No amount of glitter sprinkled in his hair could deflect attention from his technical inadequacies, and he made no effort to hide his misery, his fury, and his contempt. Larisa Lezhnina, a young corps de ballet dancer who did not appear before closing night owing to injury, was the hapless object of Ruzimatov's inattention. Whether she was still suffering the effects of her injury or simply is not up to the demands of this role, her performance was a mere sketch. The ensemble was out of its depth, unable to keep together or to keep up with the music.

Things had gone better at the matinee, where Asylmuratova and Zaklinsky at least had made dents in their roles. Asylmuratova's adagio contained moments of great beauty, though her allegro was far from impressive. She does not seem to realize that sometimes a développé is just a développé, that it does not always need to unfold with numbing deliberation and to be finished off with a flourish of the hand. A développé in Balanchine's choreography requires that the leg be raised and fully extended on the count, the dancer poised to move on to the next step; otherwise she will find herself continually behind. Zaklinsky was game but had that harried look typical of men new to Balanchine's demanding partnering. Of the difficult male solos, the most that can be said is that he got through them—just. Though only in his mid-thirties, Zaklinsky dances as if he were on the brink of retirement, which is a pity. He is always pleasant to look at, and as the slave trader in *Le Corsaire* he was the only one on stage who seemed to realize he was in a comedy.

New York was only the first stop on a cross-country tour that would take the Kirov Ballet to our nation's capital and thence to the West

4 Some critics attributed the Kirov dancers' tendency to dance with the weight over the heels to their unaccustomedness to performing on unraked stages, but Nancy Reynolds noted this aspect of Kirov training even on their raked home turf (see *Ballet Review*, Summer 1989, p. 46). Their difficulty with pirouettes can also be traced to this backward-leaning stance, as well as to their puzzling persistence in refusing to spot the head consistently.

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Coast. With orchestra seats going for seventy-five hard-currency dollars and the house selling out every night, it can be said with some certainty that we have not seen the last of our cousins from Leningrad.

The Kirov's brief encounter with Balanchine is steeped in symbolism, but it is highly doubtful that the experiment will have any lasting effects on the company's entrenched systems of teaching, repertory, and orchestral conducting. To the Kirov, Balanchine is simply another repertory expander, like Béjart and Petit—both much admired by Vinogradov, and both represented at the Kirov. (The company chose not to inflict upon us either of the two Béjart excerpts they had prepared for their "Contemporary Choreography" program.)

If we did not learn anything new about classicism from the Kirov, American ballet will nevertheless benefit from the Soviet Union's new openness, albeit in a way we might not have suspected. With ex-Kirov dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov departing as artistic director of American Ballet Theatre next year—having turned it into a very dull affair in an attempt to remodel it along the lines of Balanchine's New York City Ballet sans a choreographer of Balanchine's stature—the company that Lucia Chase built will probably revert to its original policy of creating excitement by importing glamorous foreign guest stars. Among them in the years to come will no doubt be numerous glamorous foreign guest stars from Leningrad.

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Books

Made of Steiner stuff

by John Simon

Consider three exhibits from George Steiner's latest book, *Real Presences*.[1] Exhibit A: "The root-phenomenology of the journalistic is, in a sense, metaphysical. It articulates an epistemology and ethics of spurious temporality. Journalistic presentation generates a temporality of equivalent instantaneity." Exhibit B (particularly interesting because it convey's Steiner's notion of simplicity): "The fact is, simply, this: inasmuch as the generation and communicative verbalization of all interpretations and value-judgements are of the order of language, all elucidation and criticism of literature, music and the arts must operate within the undecidability of unbounded sign-systems." Exhibit C: "No documentation, where each document is a speech-act susceptible of interpretative reconstruction and deconstruction, in respect of what we now take to be the *accelerando* of time-feelings during and after the French Revolution, will provide us with any reliable causality in regard to the dramatization of pace and dimension in the sonatas or symphonies of Beethoven."

The reader's mind takes to this kind of writing not like a duck to water but like water to a duck's back. That the thought process in these prototypical passages is complicated and convoluted is problem enough; but that the expression, with all its bloodless abstraction and technical jargon, is contorted and impacted on top of that makes it impossible to grab hold of what one reads. So one reads it over and over again, hoping that repetition will make this paragraph or sentence clearer. But the only thing that becomes clear is that no help is forthcoming from anywhere. The original title of Steiner's work was *Real Presences: Is There Anything In What We Say?* For the American edition, the University of Chicago Press dropped the subtitle (still there on the page proof). I can see why.

I am fully aware that in current academic writing Steiner's prose ranks well below the peak of obscurantism. Saussure, Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, and their followers have reached heights of inscrutability that leave Steiner, panting and wheezing, far behind. However out of breath, though, Steiner does scale impressive altitudes as he awaits the Second Coming: "some successor to Derrida [who] may share not only the master's epistemological *élan,* erudition and metaphysical wit—a very rare gift—but could invest these in a truly literary sensibility, in a feeling for language and form, however wary." It may be that Steiner is the—wary—answer to his own chiliastic longings.

In a typical paragraph, Steiner will begin with the New Criticism and, before you know it, be off on Dante, Shakespeare, Surrealism, Pindaric odes, Vivaldi, Couperin, Pushkin, Tolstoy, Delacroix, and Malevich, with acrobatic skill the Flying Wallendas

1 *Real Presences*, by George Steiner; University of Chicago Press, 236 pages, $19.95.

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would envy. He follows this up, in the very next paragraph, with Marx, Taine, Sainte-Beuve, Dr. Johnson. And then: "It is abstruse nonsense to try and [for "try to"] experience Blake without knowledge, however imperfect, of the complicated solitudes within social class which [for "that"] fuel the inspired idiosyncrasies of his artisanship and vision. The sociology of marginality in regard to religion and personal background is as crucial to a reading of Donne as it is to one of Proust." How, I wonder, does one make one's nonsense less abstruse and acquire a knowledge, however imperfect, of complicated solitudes within social class? Where do we go to study the sociology of marginality?

Yet before we have had a chance to ponder our ignorance in these matters, Steiner, in the very next sentence, sends us reeling again: "A thorough study of the effects of private income on certain forms and periods of aesthetic creation would enlighten us about vital elements in, say, Turgenev, Henry James, Paul Cézanne or Thomas Mann." But he rushes on without disbursing the slightest enlightenment. Is this because he feels unenlightened himself? That cannot be, since he tosses around these names without the air of someone guilty of abstruse nonsense. It must mean that although he himself has made that thorough study, it cannot be compressed into the narrow confines of his 232-page book, and the rest of us must simply take his knowledge on faith. *Magister dixit.*

One more example of how this snow job works: with enough of Steiner's prose dumped on the ground, one could hold the Winter Olympics in equatorial Africa. Thus: "A Flaubert sentence implicates, as it were, the precedent of prose fiction as a whole and of the lyric and dramatic modes from which prose fiction abstains or, in Flaubert's case, which it internalizes within its own claims to surpassing universality." If such things were a matter of the odd sentence or paragraph, one might be forgiving. They are, however, virtually without relief, the matter of the entire book. "Ah," you cry, "the entire book at last. Instead of rushing into details, tell us what *that* is about!" I'm glad you asked, because that is the very thing I kept asking myself as I toiled, hour after laborious hour, over the exhausting pages of this short but endless book.

To the best of my decoding ability, the first section, "A Secondary City," expresses the utopian hope for a "city" in which there would be no secondary writing about the arts. There would be the primary writings, the paintings and sculptures, and the music, and what criticism there might be would content itself with establishing the best possible texts and adding a few simple explanatory notes. This dispensation would exclude (I should think) the greatly desiderated studies of the effects of private income on the vital elements in Turgenev, James, *et al.*, not to mention the collected works of George Steiner, but at this point in his self-contradictory game our author doesn't seem to mind.

According to Steiner, the finest critic-commentators on a work of art are other artists. So "Virgil reads, guides our feelings of, Homer as no external critic can." Dante provides "the closest of critical readings" of Virgil, Joyce and Pound provide master readings of Homer. "The primary critique of *Middlemarch* [is] in *The Portrait of a Lady*." "The most useful criticism" of Shakespeare's *Othello* is Boito's libretto to Verdi's opera. (Could be, but what happens if we need a critique of *Cymbeline*?) And so on, as the "city of the primary" prospers. Yet all this praise of the primary is expressed in a most baroquely secondary way. There is vertiginous name-dropping, for example: the book reads like a university library card catalogue hit by a tornado. Pythian apothegms abound, e.g.: "Dogma can be defined as hermeneutic punctuation, as the promulgation of semantic arrest." Or, somewhat less lapidarily: "I must, even if only provisionally, consider the intimate complementarities between the authentic act of reading, an authentic motion of answerability to music and to art, and the rights of human privacy,

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to the wholly personal hospitality we owe to our own death—rights and an indebtedness now under pressure of narcotic devaluation in a culture of the secondary."

The second section, "The Broken Contract," expatiates on our changed sense of meaning, or of "the meaning of meaning." It used to be believed that the world was the world, and that the word represented it. But the advances in physics have altered our understanding of matter, and various writers, starting with Mallarmé and Rimbaud, have changed our sense of the word. Hence the relationship of word to world has also undergone radical change, thanks especially to the efforts of modern philosophers and structuralist and poststructuralist critics. As Steiner puts it, with great succinctness and opacity, "No formalization or genetic description has related unequivocally or demonstrably the discrete phonetic-lexical-syntactic components of a sentence to the meaning, to the lives (the semantic whole) of that sentence."

"The very term 'meaning,'" Steiner proceeds, "ought to be replaced by something like 'non-finite possibility' or 'tracings,' as these are invoked both in Freud's pursuit of the spoors of the unconscious and in the physicist's image of the momentary passage of sub-atomic particles through the cloud-chamber." But don't be fooled by this into thinking that Steiner is duped by Freud: "The Freudian proposal . . . I, personally, find no more and no less penetrative [a favorite word of Steiner's], ingenious and metaphorically suggestive than was the faith in demonology and exorcism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries . . . ." And, again: "The Tablets of the Law, which Moses broke in a moment of deconstructive perception, cannot be re-assembled." And, categorically: "*All* readings are misreadings."

Much of this central section agonizes over deconstruction, pro and con, and ends up—in John Gross's phrase about Steiner's *démarche* at the time of the F. R. Leavis-C. P. Snow controversy—"crawling in both directions." The upshot is, "We must ask of ourselves and of our culture whether a secular, in essence positivist, model of understanding and of the experience of meaningful form (the aesthetic) is tenable in the light or, if you will, in the dark of the nihilistic alternative." In the final section, "Presences," Steiner answers his question with his own model of understanding.

"Presences" is nothing less than Steiner's demonstration of the existence of God. The procedure, for all its surface ornamentation and stylistic hocus-pocus, is laughably simple: because the wonders of literature, the fine arts, and, especially, music exist, God must exist. In his art, the artist recreates the Creation. To make matters easier for himself, Steiner does not vouchsafe us any sort of concept of God, much less a theodicy. As he puts it:

> All representations, even the most abstract, infer [he means "imply"] a rendezvous with intelligibility or, at the least, with a strangeness attenuated, qualified by observance [this should be "observation," but, as Fowler notes, "a perverted taste for out-of-the-way forms" has been undoing this useful distinction] and willed form. Apprehension (the meeting with the other) signifies both fear and perception. The continuum between both [correctly, "the two"], the modulation from one to the other, lies at the source of poetry and the arts.

This passage is quintessential Steiner. Aside from the misuse of "infer" and the highly questionable use of "observance"—at the very least it muddles what risked being clear—we get the mania for etymologizing, as in that apprehending of "apprehension." Now, there is nothing wrong with making use of etymology, except when it becomes a rhetorical tic, as it does with Steiner, another one of whose tics is the fixation on certain words, e.g., "underwrite" and "underwritten"—not in the sense of the antithesis to Steiner's style but in the metaphorical one of supporting, justifying, legitimizing something. Here, too, the sloppiness of that "both" should be noted:

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both is a unifying term, whereas *between* demands a term denoting discreteness. I assume that the two poles between which this continuum stretches are "fear" and "perception." But because Steiner does not make clear how this pair of far from antithetical terms can become opposite extremes, we wonder whether the continuum might not be between "I" and the "other," or even between "intelligibility" and "apprehension." It is possible to deduce, I think, what Steiner means, but why make it so difficult and inconclusive an operation? But, then, as he puts it in an image remarkable for its clumsiness, "We knock blindly at the doors of turbulence, of creativity, of inhibition within the *terra incognita* of our own selves." Not only blindly, it seems, but also tone-deafly.

It is indeed remarkable how poorly Steiner, who is a published novelist, handles language when he tries to rise above the academic (which he also mangles, as we have seen) into the belletristic. Consider the following, which comes on the heels of the precept "Let the metal of a Brancusi figure sing to your hand":

> It is poetics, in the full sense, which inform [for "informs"] us of the visitor's visa in place and in time which defines our status as transients in a house of being whose foundations, whose future history, whose rationale—if any—lie wholly outside our will and comprehension. It is the capacity of the arts, in a definition which must, I believe, be allowed to include the living forms of the speculative (what tenable vision of poetics will exclude Plato, Pascal, Nietzsche?), to make us, if not at home, at least alertly, answerably peregrine in the unhousedness of our human circumstance. Without the arts, form would remain unmet and strangeness without speech in the silence of the stone.

Note the two images—the "visitor's visa" and "transients in a house"—which, aside from being individually trite and threadbare, clash with each other (you don't need visas for staying in a house, you need them for travel). Note also the collapse of that house trope: a house does indeed have foundations, but "future history" is already straining a bit; with "rationale—if any," however, the house collapses as surely as if it belonged to Roderick Usher; houses have blueprints, not rationales. Plato, who would certainly have excluded poetics from *his* vision, does not belong in any vision of poetics, any more than Pascal does, despite some poetic *pensées*. (Nietzsche, who was a real poet as well as a philosopher, does belong.) "Alertly, answerably peregrine" is fine writing that cries out for the blue pencil; "the unhousedness of human circumstances" self-contradictorily bulldozes the preceding trope, the "house of being." As for that last sentence, it seems to have got stuck trying to emerge from the stone: By what or whom would form be unmet? And does that "strangeness without speech" likewise modify "form" (i.e., would the form remain not only unmet but also strange and speechless?) or is it a further piece of bad news (i.e., form would be unmet and, on top of that, another necessary quality, strangeness, would be denied a voice?); we get the general drift, of course, but is that enough? Yet why expect clarity from someone who goes on to say that "the verity of a poem or a painting is that of the specific internality and integrity of its shaping"? If that's the kind of speech that gets coaxed from the silence of the stone, it might be better if the stones kept mum.

Finally, Steiner's full intent emerges—if anything this opaquely put can be said to emerge: "Classically, where branch and leaf are highest, *cortesia* [the Renaissance concept of courtesy] qualifies the last ambush or the final tryst which is the possible venue—the coming, the coming to a place—of God." Once again the ponderous etymologizing (on "venue"), and once again the conflicting and confusing metaphors: the highest branch and leaf, the last ambush or final tryst. I should think that trysts and ambushes work best not where branch and leaf are highest but where they are thickest. And how does *cortesia* "qualify" this last ambush or final tryst? And lest anyone think that the

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context might put an end to bafflement, let him be disabused by reading the entire paragraph on page 148, which also includes a helpful quotation from Paul de Man, according to which death is merely "a displaced name for a linguistic predicament."

Along with such weighty imponderables, Steiner dispenses *faux-naïf* cuteness. Thus: "'Being and time,' says the philosopher." Since when is Martin Heidegger *the* philosopher? And has *any* philosopher since Aristotle in the Middle Ages been referred to as "the philosopher" *tout court*? Heidegger, need I say, figures prominently among Steiner's trendy icons, as do the French and American structuralists and poststructuralists. Other icons include, with predictable canonicity (to use a condignly awful word), Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Wittgenstein, Adorno, Benjamin, Jakobson, Lukács, *et al.*—pretty much the team any hard-core academic would field these days. There is a corresponding roster of prestigious writers and artists, and to these Steiner now adds musicians. A relative latecomer to the pleasures of music, Steiner appears to have become besotted with it after the fashion of a preening parvenu. References to composers of every period, to compositions cited for their totemic value, dot page after page, yet seldom is the choice of a citation explained cogently. Thus a "dual motion [the finality of death and a certain refusal of that very finality], instinctual to humanity but scandalous to reason, is evident, it is made transparent to spiritual, intellectual and physical notice, in Schubert's C-major Quintet. Listen to the slow movement." Besides observing the sorry syntax and worse punctuation, notice also the arbitrariness of the musical selection. This kind of ex cathedra pronunciamento spreads like a cancer throughout the book: compare, for example, "Over and over, a Dante, a Hölderlin, a Montale tell us of what poetry is saying when, exactly when, words fail it." Why that particular triangulation? Why not Goethe, Novalis, and Leopardi? Why not Neruda, Nerval, and Nezval?

But it is the intemperate, sweeping grandiosity with which Steiner proclaims the supremacy of music that shows, or shows up, his hand. Typical is the reference "to what I take to be the single most intricate organization of the interactions of feelings and of [this wallowing in prepositional excess is also typical] meanings known to us, which is that deployed in a string quartet." What yardstick has Steiner in his capacious pocket with which to measure the intricacy of organization of the interactions of feelings and meanings? But on he lunges: "The time which music 'takes' and which it gives as we perform or experience it, is the only *free time* granted us prior to death." I am not sure I know what this "free time" is, but I am reasonably sure that none of it will, despite Steiner's unintentional ambiguity, be granted us *after* death.

Yet even when Steiner does try to justify the choice of a musical example, he does not make sense:

> A kindred freedom, the mortal artisan's compulsion to create for himself and others the singularity, the verity of his own essence in the face both of the servitude of his unwilled, unchosen coming into the world, and in the face of the absurd, unnaming logic of death, inspires Shostakovich's fifteen Quartets . . . . These quartets constitute, in a sense discarded by modern biology, an act of spontaneous generation. The composer "composes" his own private, social, political identity. He is re-born to an inviolate freedom, to a possession of his own coming and going hither.

The passage plays with Edgar's "Men must endure/Their going hence, even as their coming hither," but it is not even English: you can be "coming hither," but not "going hither." Nevertheless, the idea seems to be that Shostakovich created with his quartets a parallel and more acceptable life for himself, controlled his birth (spontaneous generation) and his death (his going—ugh!—hither). But this is nonsense, first of all because if it applies to one artist and his works, it must apply to all artists; but if to all, it's a pointless platitude. If, on the other

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hand, there is a specific meaning, we must ask: Why the fifteen quartets and not the fifteen symphonies, at least one of which, the tenth, is downright autobiographical? Yes, I know, the quartets are more private than the symphonies; but even so, how can works written over a great many years constitute anything as deliberate and systematic as a "private, social, political identity"? And how can composing, or even "composing," a conscious and protracted act, be equated with spontaneous generation, the ancient explanation for the cropping up of vermin—mice, rats, insects? And, speaking syntactically and stylistically, what kind of writer maneuvers himself into having to repeat "in the face," and incorrectly at that: the construction "both of" requires a mere "and of" for its completion. And in what sense can a compulsion, even a compulsion to create, be called a freedom? And what is "the absurd, unnaming logic of death"? "Logic," I suppose, is just a loose usage for "inevitability," but what in heaven's name is that "unnaming"? This, alas, is the sort of abstruse nonsense Steiner turns out by the ream.

Our author's arrogance knows no bounds; it comes out most markedly in unguarded moments, though it is plentiful at all times. Thus Steiner calls the ascription of certain acts to the unconscious "a secular phrasing of what I have called 'alterity.'" If Freud's term is merely secular, Steiner's must be religious. But it isn't. Linguistically and sonorously, "alterity" is an unholy coinage. In a key passage (page 215), Steiner makes his "wager" both Cartesian and Pascalian (belt and suspenders?) and postulates "a real presence in the semantic markers which generate Oedipus the King or Madame Bovary; in the pigments or incisions which externalize Grünewald's Issenheim triptych [it is in Isenheim, and it's not a triptych but an altarpiece of several panels] or Brancusi's *Bird*; in the notes, crotchets, markings of tempo and volume which actualize Schubert's posthumous Quintet." In short—though Steiner, of course, does it in long—the artist intuits [Steiner's own ugly word] the *fiat* of creation and re-enacts the divine making of the world. This, I imagine, is what happened in Steiner's two fictions, *Anno Domini* and *The Portage to San Cristobal of AH.*

In another key passage (pages 216-17), Steiner asks whether all art is of religious origin, and answers with an apodictic affirmative. A religious impulse "underwrite[s] [there's that darling word again] created forms from Homer and the *Oresteia* to *The Brothers Karamazov* and Kafka. It informs art from the caves at Lascaux to Rembrandt and to Kandinsky." And he concludes the passage with a quotation from Leibniz: " 'Music is a secret arithmetic of the soul unknowing of the fact that it is counting' (*nescientia se numerare*)." (If Steiner's English rendition is correct, the Latin would have to be *se numerare nesciens.*) In the bound galleys of the book, however, there is a sublime misprint: the compositor—or, more likely, the Creator—prints "a secret arithmetic of the soul unknowing ox." That, with a hyphen between "soul" and "unknowing," describes Steiner pretty accurately. Indeed, this typo does more than Steiner can to make me believe in the numinous.

From here on in, unsupported claim jostles unsupported claim. Take, for example, the following: "Even within a domestic, secular genre, which is that of the modern novel, the great exemplars continue to ask, aloud or beneath their breath (as in Proust), the one question ineradicable in man: is there or is there not God? Is there or is there not meaning to being?" This is, arguably, not one but two questions; yet worse than Steiner's arithmetic (or logic) is his arrogance: What gives him the right to determine at one fell swoop what Proust and all the other great modern novelists have been asking "beneath their breath"—or, if he really knows something, let him not withhold his knowledge from us. On Proust, by the way, Steiner is particularly inspired: "There can . . . be no *Remembrance of Things Past* without Proust's summons of

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the death-Angels whose wings infold with the leaves of the masterworks of the dead craftsmen." I defy anyone to explicate that sentence.

Questions about "poetry, music, art . . . are finally theological questions," we are apprised, and there follow passages (such as the one on pages 229-30) that even a parodist might blush to have perpetrated. I choose at random—and because it is short—"the verticalities of reference . . . which are still the ontological guarantors of the arcs of metaphor . . . ." But what can you expect from someone who preaches the higher metaphysics but has neglected to learn (or observe) the rudiments of grammar—about which too, incidentally, he keeps pontificating. In a single sentence, Steiner writes "Titian . . . or Rodin represent" and "there are disciplines . . . for whom." (Similarly, he wrote, "The political acumen of a Dostoevsky or a Conrad are difficult to match," but from this, as from countless other errors of every kind, the copy editor has saved him.) We do still get redundancy such as "mutual interplay" and "general consensus," "intriguing" for "fascinating," "these politics are," "semiotics are," "only silence (or music) give access," "The ultimate basis of such delusion, innocence or cunning, its final validation, are theological," "what words refer to are [for "is"] other words," "to use the word *rose* as if it was [for "were"]," etc.

And such outlandishnesses as "the which proposal is," "no sceptic, Pyrrho or after," "nothing more nor less," "the tune is stentorious" [where the correct word is "stentorian," and applies to the singer, not to the tune], "obeissant" [for "obeisant," but, in any case, an archaism], "both in [for "in both"] the social and the individual moment," "acerbic" [for "acerb"], "More ancient than language possessed of 'thrones, dominions, powers,' more secret than those bestowed on speech [those what?]," "Neither the expression . . . nor the re-interpretation . . . have," and so on and on.

But what can you expect from a critic who, in his *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, performed stylistic analysis on a passage from the Russian on the basis of its uses of "a" and "the," even though Russian has neither the definite nor the indefinite article? Of a scholar, moreover, who in an essay in *The Atlantic Monthly* settled the vexed "Homeric question" (without knowing Greek): the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are the works of the same poet, the former of his angry youth, the latter of his mellow old age? Of a fellow (sorry, Extraordinary Fellow, his title at Cambridge University; in Geneva, he is a professor) who published a two-part essay in *The Kenyon Review* arguing that Robert Graves was an overrated minor poet, but an underrated major prose writer, and cited as evidence, among others, Graves's *two* novels about the Argonauts, *The Golden Fleece* and *Hercules, My Shipmate*—without realizing that they were the *same* novel under its British and American titles? And when a reader wrote in, pointing out this and other comparable errors, Steiner's printed rejoinder was not an apology but a string of insults hurled at the hapless correspondent.

Finally, however, the gravest trouble with the book under examination is none of the above; rather, it is that, whatever may be true of the divine, there is no *human* presence in *Real Presences*. Save for two remarks—that *Othello* is almost more painful than he can bear (which proves his enormous sensitivity) and that an Edith Piaf song, cheap though it may be, gets to him (although this is promptly used as a basis for comparing himself to Wagner, who had a similar obsession with *The Postilion of Lonjumeau* [or "Longjumeau," as Steiner misspells it])—Steiner gives us no sense of a person behind *Real Presences*; it might as well be the lucubrations of an academically trained robot. It seems to have been written in a book- and cork-lined study inside an ivory tower so hermetically sealed off from the world that even the ivy is not allowed to look in at its windows.

And, incidentally, Adolphe Adam's *Le Postillon de Lonjumeau* is quite a charming work; certainly one less to be ashamed of than, say, *Real Presences*.

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The use of history

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn August 1914: The Red Wheel/Knot I. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 854 pages, $50

reviewed by Craig S. Lerner

"From childhood I had somehow known that my objective was the history of the Russian Revolution," writes Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in *The Gulag Archipelago*. In 1937, at the age of eighteen, Solzhenitsyn began work on "a big novel," modeled on Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, spanning the years 1914 to 1917. He spent months in the libraries of Rostov researching the opening campaign of World War I. The main character of the original *August 1914* (which was never published) was, like the author, an idealistic Marxist, and the novel itself was intended to show, in the words of Solzhenitsyn's first wife, "the complete triumph of the Revolution on a global scale." By the time Solzhenitsyn returned to the novel an eventful thirty years later (after war, prison camps, cancer, exile), he had abandoned Marxism, and the main character was promptly transformed into an idealistic Tolstoyan *cum* Russian patriot. This version of *August 1914* appeared in English in 1972. Solzhenitsyn returned to the novel yet again in the late 1970s, conducting research at Stanford's Hoover Institution and expanding the novel to nearly twice its original length. The (presumably) final version has at last been rendered into English by Harry T. Willetts.

August 1914 is an historical and imaginative reconstruction of the opening weeks of World War I and of the events that led up to it. In Solzhenitsyn's view, the war left Russia "spiritually wrecked" and ripe for revolution. Though Lenin appears in only one chapter (new to this edition), the specter of revolution hovers in the background of every tsarist calamity. The novel is told from rapidly shifting perspectives, including those of generals, statesmen, and revolutionaries drawn from history, and of line officers, students, and landowners who are fictional creations. In addition, the reader is treated to film scenarios, historical documents, Russian proverbs, and newspaper clippings.

It is Solzhenitsyn's view that a truthful account of this period in Russian history—in effect, the period that constituted the opening shots of the Revolution—has never been written. Western historians, suffering from liberal prejudice, have misunderstood it; Russian historians have deliberately misrepresented it; and Russian émigré writers, shirking their duties as Russians and writers, have simply ignored it. In the *Gulag*, Solzhenitsyn tells of an acquaintance named Yuri who, travelling through Berlin in the 1930s, managed to read novelists like Nabokov and Bunin, who were banned in the Soviet Union.

> Yuri had anticipated that . . . the blood flowing from Russia's living wounds would pour from every page. What was wrong with them? To what did they devote their unutterably precious freedom? To the female body, to ecstasy, sunsets . . . . They wrote as if there had been no revolution in Russia, or as if it were too complex for them to explain.

As the *Gulag* was a meticulous record of the camps, so *August 1914* is a meticulous record of the beginnings of the Revolution. Solzhenitsyn writes as if the responsibility to preserve the memory of these events has devolved singularly upon him.

In telling the history of both the gulags and the Revolution, Solzhenitsyn makes no pretense to having a pedant's cool sense of detachment. He plainly identifies the good guys and the bad guys, rises to lyricism when describing the former, boils with rage when describing the latter. Solzhenitsyn is like a public prosecutor flying back through the past in a time machine: he sets the dial at any date when a crime went unpunished, puts those who escaped the judgment of their contemporaries and historians on the witness stand, and conducts an impassioned

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cross-examination. For the historian, Solzhenitsyn suggests, the primary duty is to assign responsibility, to bring the evil deeds of the past into the broad daylight of present judgment. "In keeping silent about evil," he writes in the *Gulag*, "we are implanting it and it will rise up a thousandfold in the future."

Solzhenitsyn's understanding of the use of history corresponds to what Nietzsche called "critical history." The historian, according to Nietzsche, "must have the strength, and use it from time to time, to shatter and dissolve something to enable him to live: this he achieves by dragging it to the bar of judgment, interrogating it meticulously and finally condemning it . . . . One puts the knife to [the] roots." Solzhenitsyn in *August 1914* puts the knife to the roots of the Revolution. He hurls accusations at revolutionaries and "educated society," and at the tsarist army and bureaucracy. He has critical things to say as well of the French and the Jews. As a philosopher of history, Solzhenitsyn makes Tolstoy his major antagonist: Solzhenitsyn opposes the view that the individual is powerless to determine the course of history. *August 1914* also contains a jab at Hegel and, for good measure, at the Enlightenment. This is, to riot in understatement, an ambitious work.

August 1914 is, moreover, only the first volume of Solzhenitsyn's four-volume history of the Revolution. *The Red Wheel*, the work's overarching title, is written as a series of "knots," or discrete periods of time of concentrated historical significance. For the past ten years, Solzhenitsyn has been working eight hours a day or more (this explains his much-discussed "disappearance"), and has completed *October 1916* and *March 1917*, both of which are to be released next year in English; he is also halfway through the final volume, *April 1917*. *The Red Wheel* is expected to run, in toto, six to seven thousand pages. What Solzhenitsyn writes of one of the heroes of *August 1914* appears true of Solzhenitsyn himself: "In men of high purpose the seed of all their future endeavors is sown in their earliest years."

The opening chapters of *August 1914* are set in the Caucasus, well behind the lines of battle, and introduce the reader to characters who re-appear, if only briefly, throughout the novel. The first is Sasha Lazhenitsyn. Although his part in *August 1914* is fairly minor, he will probably play a major role in later volumes of the work. Sasha is a likably confused young man, not quite able to square his Tolstoyan principles of passivity and pacifism with his enthusiastic desire to help Russia in her time of need. On route from his native village in the Caucasus to Moscow, where he intends to volunteer, he meets a classmate who chides him for betraying his Tolstoyan ideals and for coming to the defense of the "idiot Emperor."

Thus is initiated one of the recurring themes of the novel, the estrangement of "educated society" from the tsarist order. Solzhenitsyn is obviously critical of this segment of society for its irresponsible attacks upon the tsar, and he does not scruple to depict it in a highly unfavorable light. Juxtaposed with the idealistic Sasha is the progressive-thinking son of a rich landowner who purports to want to do great things for Russia, plots the advances of her armies in East Prussia on a map, and then sends his father to Rostov to buy him a deferment. In another chapter, a radical would-be benefactor of Russia rapes a girl. When Lenin makes his appearance in the novel, he is seen to possess a similar moral rectitude, as he disdains the masses and abuses his wife.

Solzhenitsyn's harsh criticisms of revolutionaries and "educated society" have prompted Irving Howe, in *The New York Times Book Review*, to dismiss *August 1914* as a work of shrill polemics. According to Howe, Solzhenitsyn fails to fulfill the novelist's task of imagining another human being, of presenting even those with whom he disagrees as plausible individuals and not as mere caricatures. But on this aspect of Solzhenitsyn's novel, I believe Howe is wrong. For me, Solzhenitsyn's Lenin is not a caricature but a convincing portrait of an

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evil man. Furthermore, Solzhenitsyn shows that he is capable of understanding and even sympathizing with characters whose views oppose his own. In one scene, two middle-aged former revolutionaries succeed in impressing upon their niece, as well as upon the reader, the genuine heroism of those late nineteenth-century revolutionaries who risked their lives to liberalize Russia—something Lenin scrupulously did not do. In another scene, a Jewish girl angrily attacks her father for demonstrating in support of the tsar at the outbreak of hostilities: "You're in a ridiculous, degrading, servile situation, but you might at least refrain from underlining your slavish loyalism! . . . Patriotism, you say? Patriotism in *this* country? Patriotism and pogroms are never far apart. You can't even train as a nurse unless you're a Christian by religion . . . . They're afraid Jewish girls might poison the wounded."

Many critics, including Howe, have detected anti-Semitism in the writings of Solzhenitsyn, and *August 1914* does, alas, bring across the fact that many of Russia's revolutionaries were Jewish. Yet Solzhenitsyn makes plausible why so many young Jews in particular, considering themselves part of a persecuted minority, and so many young Russians in general, repelled by the backward government of their country, were drawn into revolutionary politics. While charging both groups with ingratitude and irresponsibility, Solzhenitsyn, as historical prosecutor, is far more lenient with them than he is with the tsarist bureaucracy and the army. "We mustn't blame our Russian youngsters," remarks a sage-like figure later in the novel. "It's a universal law: arrogance is the main symptom of immaturity."

Fairly early in the novel Solzhenitsyn moves from the home front in the Caucasus to East Prussia, the scene of the initial engagement of Russian and German armies. This historical section vastly outdistances the opening fictional one, and Irving Howe objects that Solzhenitsyn simply loses interest in the characters of his beginning chapters. *August 1914* would have been, it is true, a more "normal" and perhaps even a more aesthetically effective work had the fictional and historical sections been evenly balanced. But Solzhenitsyn's intention is not so much aesthetically to delight as it is historically to report: in its final form, *August 1914* has as its model not *War and Peace* but the *Gulag*.

The main characters in Solzhenitsyn's treatment of the war are General Samsonov and Colonel Vorotyntsev. The former, the actual commander of Russia's Second Army, is portrayed as a well-intentioned patriot hopelessly out of his depth in modern warfare. Uncertain as to the whereabouts of his own troops, clueless as to the whereabouts of the Germans, Samsonov is a truly pathetic figure. After the first days of battle, his blunders crowd in upon him and he wanders off, dazed, and shoots himself. Colonel Vorotyntsev, a creation of Solzhenitsyn's, is the designated scout of the Russian General Staff. He gallops from battle to battle, and through him the reader gets an overall sense of Russia's rapidly deteriorating position. Vorotyntsev is intended to be representative of a small group of young career officers eager to modernize Russia and yet loyal to the tsar. If the novel has a hero, Vorotyntsev is it.

Even readers not generally captivated by military history are likely to be swept along by Solzhenitsyn's dramatic presentation of events. The reader's task would have been considerably easier, however, had a few maps been included (in addition to the not particularly helpful one at the back of the book). As the reader tries to follow in his mind one corps moving eight miles to the south, another twelve to the southwest, and still another nineteen to the northeast, he begins to sympathize with the bewildered Samsonov: where is everybody? "War takes on a different complexion when you have a full set of maps!" rejoices a Russian lieutenant upon finding some, and one can imagine how he felt.

According to Solzhenitsyn, the French, in the grip of panic and "hysterical anxiety," prodded the Russians into invading East

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Prussia before their armies were prepared to do so. "Vorotyntsev," we read, "was not fond of 'our allies,'" and one has the distinct impression that Solzhenitsyn is similarly inclined. In fairness to the French, however, it should be noted that the Germans *were* shelling the outskirts of Paris; their panic and hysteria might be better described as reasonable concern. In any event, it is unlikely that the blundering sycophants in command of the Russian armies would have profited from any additional time to prepare. Indeed, Solzhenitsyn himself places the bulk of the responsibility for Russia's defeat squarely on the shoulders of Russia's own generals. He names them all, reveals the arresting extent of their incompetence (which each cleverly concealed), and charges them with cowardice and treason.

In these chapters, Solzhenitsyn steps up his criticism of Tolstoy, adumbrated in his early presentation of Sasha. *War and Peace* had made an idol of General Kutuzov, the leader of the Russian armies that fought off Napoleon; in that novel, Kutuzov was presented as the embodiment of Russian humility and peasant wisdom. By acknowledging the inability of the individual to determine the course of history, Kutuzov, in Tolstoy's account, achieves victory precisely because he does not actively seek it. (In reality, Kutuzov was a feeble general inexplicably favored by fortune; Tolstoy was scoring a philosophic point at the expense of the historical record.)

Solzhenitsyn appears to regard Tolstoy's teaching not only as wrong—"If a man is a natural commander the outcome of a military engagement is more than half dependent upon him"—but as morally reprehensible, because it encourages individuals to adopt a pose of cowardly immobility and to justify such a pose as profound wisdom. Solzhenitsyn writes of one Russian general that he belonged to the "school of saintly passivity. 'Remember [the general hears his teacher saying]—you are Kutuzov's heirs!'" To which Solzhenitsyn retorts: "Asses! Imagine having three cavalry divisions and not one of them out in front looking for the vanished Germans!"

Yet however strident Solzhenitsyn is in his denunciation of Tolstoy, he appears at times to acknowledge the possible truth of at least part of Tolstoy's view. Battles are repeatedly depicted as scenes of utter chaos impervious to individual control. This is especially the case in modern warfare, where fronts are so large that no commander can possibly direct all his troops. To judge by the novel, it was quite beyond the power of any one person to divert Russia from the disaster that loomed before her; tsarist Russia is symbolized in the book by the recurring image of a red wheel hurtling out of control.

Why was Russia so out of control in 1914, so seemingly doomed? Halfway through the novel, Solzhenitsyn breaks off his war narrative and sketches the decade and a half immediately preceding the war. In hundreds of pages new to this edition, he tells the history of this turbulent period in a series of "knots" that cover the years 1899 to 1911. He focuses on three individuals: the tsar; Pyotr Stolypin, prime minister of Russia from 1906 to 1911; and Dmitri Bogrov, Stolypin's assassin. If Tolstoy admires Kutuzov for his passivity in the face of history, Solzhenitsyn admires Stolypin for his defiance, his willingness to fight against both the inertial tendencies of the tsarist bureaucracy and the revolutionary tendencies of "educated society."

In the opinion of many historians, Stolypin should be best remembered for his systematic repression of the revolution of 1905-6 and for the years of reaction that followed. "This period has gone down in history as 'the years of Stolypin reaction,'" writes Solzhenitsyn, adding, "It was indeed a reaction—the reaction of souls not yet utterly lost against the obscenities around them, the reaction of the healthy part of the people against the diseased." In order to correct the misrepresentation of previous historians, Solzhenitsyn interrupts his own historical digression with a seventy-page (minute-type) biography of Stolypin: "The author would not permit himself such a crude distortion of the novel form," he

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explains, "if Russia's whole history, her very memory, had not been so distorted in the past." According to Solzhenitsyn, Stolypin should be best remembered for his attempt to introduce moderate reforms, principally designed to alleviate the burdens of the beleaguered Russian peasantry, while still preserving Russia's traditions of orthodoxy and autocracy.

Whatever chances these reforms had of succeeding were eliminated by Stolypin's assassination in 1911 by Dmitri Bogrov. The son of a rich Jewish lawyer, Bogrov was motivated by a desire to avenge the Kiev pogroms of 1905 and by his hatred of Stolypin for strengthening the autocracy. Solzhenitsyn emphasizes that Bogrov, in plotting the prime minister's death, acted alone, without the support of the Socialist Revolutionary Party. Thus the connection between the prewar "knots" and the events of August 1914 emerges: it was an individual who set the red wheel on its way. One man, acting alone, could have saved Russia, and another, acting alone, ruined her. "There was never [a pistol shot] so fraught with consequences—for the whole of the twentieth century," Solzhenitsyn writes.

Yet the novelist soon shows himself to be ambivalent about the world-historical significance of Stolypin's assassination. Stolypin, he points out, was only a minister, serving at the pleasure of a tsar who never fully trusted him. The tsar, we learn, distrusted Stolypin for his eagerness to reform (however moderately) the status of the peasant; for his interest in expanding the role of the zemstovs, or local bodies of self-government; and most of all for his willingness to work with the Duma and his consequent association with liberalism.

Solzhenitsyn's assessment of the tsar is somewhat puzzling. "The Emperor Nikolai Aleksandrovich diverged no farther from the mean of mediocrity than the average monarch," he writes at one point, though at another the tsar is said to be "weaker than any former Romanov." As the tsar's historical prosecutor, Solzhenitsyn seems peculiarly kind. He insists upon the tsar's virtue and "goodness of heart," but one wonders in what this virtue and goodness consist save his undeniable love for his family. In the novel, the tsar can scarcely be troubled to pass up the military parades he so enjoys in order to visit Stolypin on his deathbed. One recalls Solzhenitsyn's earlier comment: a man might be "a good family man, a lover of children . . . [but] no virtues can shield and excuse the man who assumes the leadership of thousands and leads them badly." The tsar, as we know, was an abysmal leader not of thousands but of millions. The tsar's greatest error, Solzhenitsyn leads us to understand, was his failure to support Stolypin and his apparent intention to relieve Stolypin of his duties as prime minister. Thus, according to the novel, Bogrov only accomplished with violence what the tsar would have shortly accomplished politically anyway. Solzhenitsyn concludes: "perhaps, then, [Stolypin] had done all that he had been meant to do. It is not given to a single individual to do so very much. One man cannot change the whole course of history."

So what, finally, is Solzhenitsyn's philosophy of history? An aged scholar whom Sasha and a friend meet in Moscow gives the closest thing to a direct answer. "History is irrational, young men. It has its own organic fabric which may be beyond our understanding." That history proceeds in a manner unknowable to, and perhaps unalterable by, man does not, however, for the sage or Solzhenitsyn, constitute a paralyzing insight or an argument for Tolstoyan resignation. Solzhenitsyn has no tolerance for those who claim the wisdom of ignorance and blithely excuse themselves from their moral duties: whether or not the individual can know with certainty what forces propel history and the universe, he can know, Solzhenitsyn insists, what his duties are. "I can't prove anything, but I feel it," says the old man. "When the bugle sounds, a man must be a man—if only for his own sake."

Here again, by calling to judgment all those who failed to answer the bugle's call, Solzhenitsyn is employing "critical history."

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But whereas other twentieth-century writers have promiscuously wielded the knife of critical history in order to expose the past as either folly or injustice, Solzhenitsyn cuts with surgical precision: he trims away the rotten and barren in order to reveal something potentially beautiful, something useful to life. "Don't mistake the branch for the tree," says a professor of medieval history at one point in the novel. "The Western Enlightenment is only one branch of Western culture, and by no means the most fruitful." For Solzhenitsyn, the most fruitful branch of Western culture has its roots in medieval Christendom—which, in its emphasis upon man's spiritual development, is opposed to the materialism of both Communism and Western liberalism. Solzhenitsyn admires the fictional Colonel Vorotyntsev and the historical Stolypin for their efforts to lead Russia along a path at once modernizing and traditional, a path that need not have culminated in Soviet dictatorship or Western-style democracy.

As present-day Russia begins, it appears, to move away from orthodox Communism—a development notably marked by the publication of excerpts of the *Gulag* in *Novy Mir*—it will have to chart for itself a new course, a course other than that prescribed by Marx and Lenin. While there are many who will measure Russia's progress by the increasing resemblance of Moscow's G.U.M. department store to the Sherman Oaks Galleria, Solzhenitsyn has something else in mind. Through his presentation of Stolypin in *August 1914*, he is beckoning his countrymen to reconsider their past, to look to it, rather than to the West, for guidance. His is a radical teaching, so completely at odds with the spirit of the age that he is probably as doomed to failure as were Vorotyntsev and Stolypin. But he is, like them, defiant, engaged in a Sisyphean struggle against the red wheel of history.

In the penultimate chapter of *August 1914*, Vorotyntsev is preparing a scathing report to the Russian General Staff. Having served in the front lines, he has seen how the generals' deceit and incompetence have resulted in the unnecessary loss of thousands of lives. Vorotyntsev himself has narrowly escaped from artillery barrages and the encircling German armies. A young fellow officer urges him to be moderate in his criticism of Russia's generals, lest they reward his honesty with demotion. "I daresay you're right," Vorotyntsev answers, but his face, we are told, is set in a "grimace of agonized intransigence." Justifying his obstinance, Vorotyntsev continues:

> "Only if you'd gone through it all yourself . . . . No, I daresay this is something a man experiences maybe once or twice in a lifetime. I want nothing in the world except to rub their noses in the truth! When I was escaping I swore that if only I came through alive . . . ."

One cannot help thinking that Solzhenitsyn, too, as he was enduring his own ordeal, made a similar vow. "A measure of bitter truth is included in my speech," he told those assembled at Harvard in 1978, and a measure of bitter truth has been included in nearly everything he has said and written over the past thirty years, including *August 1914*.

How would it look in English?

Rosanna Warren, editor The Art of Translation: Voices from the Field. Northeastern University Press, 290 pages, $37.50

reviewed by C. H. Sisson

The essays in *The Art of Translation* "emerged from lectures given over the past decade in the Translation Seminars at Boston University." Rosanna Warren has done well to collect them. There must have been much illuminating, and some baffling, talk at these seminars, and the editor does not pretend that the volume represents a consensus. Indeed, she tells us that what is

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on offer is "not a comprehensive survey of contemporary translation practice, but an indication of the fecundity of the field."

It could hardly be otherwise, with seventeen contributors each saying his or her piece on so disputatious a subject. For what is translation? Warren, in her introduction, quite rightly questions the meaning of "translation in the ordinary sense," a crude notion suggesting that "up until now translators had done nothing but dump some indefinable cargo called 'meaning' from one bucket to another . . . ." "Such a view," she adds, ". . . betrays a certain innocence in regard to literary language." Denis Donoghue, in one of the wisest essays in the volume, devoted to a particular piece of translation, sees such prestigious theories as Walter Benjamin's and Paul de Man's as belonging to "the history of irony," while "most translators continue . . . to live among words in the conviction of a more accommodating possibility," as well they might.

The editor of this volume, seeking to distinguish it from earlier "classic collections of witness by translators," points to "the recent convulsions in linguistics, philosophy, and literary theory," though leaving the contributors free to go their own ways. The fundamental contrast among them is, inevitably, between those, primarily of an abstract turn of mind, whose main passion is for theoretical discourse, and those who prefer literature itself and who still cling to the notion, sometimes held to be obsolete in so enlightened an age as our own, that it is possible to make qualitative distinctions between good work and bad.

The most accomplished literary translations—say, those of Dryden—can hardly be said to transfer whole bucketfuls of meaning; they can do no more than to throw light on some aspects of the original. Translations with no pretension to literary merit may do that in their different ways; they may even be of more use than the masterpieces, as an approach to the text. The points of contact between theory and practice remain tenuous and unsatisfactory. The interest of this volume is that it explores this uncertain interface. Theorists do not have to be illiterate, and it is not obligatory for poets to be stupid, though they may manage well enough with a certain ignorance, as who does not?

Of all those who have contributed essays to this book, J. Jorge Klor de Alva—an associate professor of anthropology and Latin American studies at the State University of New York at Albany—perhaps best illustrates the abstracting and theoretical approach. What he has to say about the historical background to Classical Nahuatl (a language used in Spain's colonies) is absorbing, even though he is a little conventionally schematic about the power relations encoded in language. The "thicket of tropes" that lies before the reader of this literature, and the belated and interrupted course of scholarship in the field, as Klor de Alva reports it, must set problems beside which those faced by Renaissance scholars in dealing with Greek and Latin texts must have been child's play. Since the 1970s there has, apparently, been a "quantum leap" in the understanding of the language, but things still appear to be some distance from the condition in which the sort of literary rummaging that produces living translations becomes possible, except perhaps in an altogether fragmentary way. The essay ends only with the claim that there can now be fruitful discussion. The finding of the "ideological devices that permit elements from one discursive formation (or register) to become part of another" may be a process necessary to the establishment of "meaning," but it is a crude and elementary stage on the road to the kind of apprehension which makes possible the raiding of one literature by another.

Not all translation, however, aims at anything so unsophisticated as a "raid." Suzanne Jill Levine clearly has other ideas. Translating the work of the Argentinian novelist Manuel Puig, which she sees as "reproducing and analyzing popular or mass

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culture"—"pop" rather than "literary in a traditional sense"—takes her into an area of elaborate maneuvers. She aims at re-enacting, for North American readers, the "blurring of boundaries between art and trash" that some find in Puig, and she has recourse to—among other devices—translating "some tango lyrics that were essential to the plot," while replacing "at least half of the epigraph quotations with either tag-lines from Hollywood films or Argentine radio commercials." I cannot judge the effectiveness of such procedures, but it is clear that they involve the assumption of a knowledge of "cultures" such that dollops of one can be taken out and offered as substitutes for dollops of another, and a degree of conscious manipulation on the part of the translator—the novelty, maybe, of an age which is more apt to believe in the social sciences than in literature.

There is an unexpected touch of a similar deliberation in Tony Harrison's preface to *Phaedra Britannica*. Harrison, a poet and above all a man of the theater, certainly does not need to be, as he says, "defensive about the poet's role as adapter," and he points to the fact that Racine himself "made his play out of the Greek of Euripides and the Latin of Seneca, as well as earlier dramatic versions of the myth in his own tongue." He is well qualified to draw on all these sources himself, and he adds a political intention of his own. He sets the scene of his play in India, on which "the exiled British," he says, "projected all that was forbidden in their own culture." "I wanted," he explains, "to state the conflict" in which his Victorian governor is entangled "at a social and political level as well as at the psychological, as it is in the Racine in a slightly different form." He is in fact using Racine's play as a peg on which to hang his own, much, as he suggests, as a Restoration tragedian might have done. It would be to mistake the nature of his enterprise to complain that little or nothing of the tone of Racine survives this process.

In a completely different context, Rosemarie Waldrop—translator of Paul Celan's *Collected Prose* and author of *The Vienna Group: Six Major Austrian Poets*—says she has "long held that translating involves envy, usurpation, and pleasure in destruction," and I suppose that if one defines the activity widely enough there is room for all that. There is, however, no place for such indulgences in the modest and scholarly essays of A. K. Ramanujan ("On Translating a Tamil Poem"), or of Parker Po-Fei Huang ("On the Translation of Chinese Poetry"). The former begins with the assertion that "the chief difficulty of translation is its impossibility," while the latter ends with a specific difficulty in a translation of his own, asking, "Could anyone enlighten me?" Both translators start, implicitly, from a position the opposite of Waldrop's, with pleasure in and respect for their originals such that when they "usurp" it is with reluctance, and when they "destroy" it is with regret. Ramanujan, talking of "translating the phonology of one language into that of another," concludes that "we can map one system on to another, but never reproduce it." He analyzes what he skeptically calls "four articles of faith" that may help the translator and may make "an impossibly difficult task, foredoomed to failure, . . . possible." His conclusion has the mark of a real workman. "If the representation in another language is not close enough," he says, "but still succeeds in 'carrying' the poem in some sense, we will have two poems instead of one." That is the true consolation for the poet/translator. Po-Fei Huang, frankly laying a version of his own beside other translators' attempts at the same poem, draws attention to the hazards incurred by those who too readily give way to this consolation; two of his competitors, he says, "are too eager to make their translations into perfect English poems."

This is a danger of which Seamus Heaney, by his own confession, has certainly fallen foul in his time. He recounts the story of his engagement with the Middle Irish poem *Buile Suibhne*. For his first version he "was actually taking off," as he puts it, from a parallel translation rather than "attending to

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the Irish itself," of which he apparently understood very little at this stage. His main concern was the subjective one of keeping "bowling along" in order "to keep up an animated rate of production." "In no mood to follow the drab, old-fashioned lead" of D. G. O'Keefe's version—prepared with an English crib for the Early Irish Texts Society in 1913—his own performance was "much more jacked up," with various tricky additions to add "voltage to the diction." Seven years later, he revised his work and "the gilding," he claims, "came off," though not so far, apparently, as to rival the sobriety, or presumably the accuracy, of O'Keefe's version. Heaney's criterion was still the "feel" he had as he wrote: "It is a guarantee of the life of the thing." "Literary translation," he says—adding, perhaps with a consciousness of not having wrestled properly with the text even at this stage, "or whatever one should call the linguistic carry-over that is mediated through a crib"—is still "an aesthetic activity." It is certainly, in Heaney's practice of it, as described by himself, a self-centered one. He was perhaps at a disadvantage from the start, having been attracted not by the texture of the Irish poem but by a didactic purpose, that of improving the minds of his Protestant compatriots in Ulster.

The approach of the English poet and translator Christopher Middleton to his text is certainly different. Struck by the character of the writing—"immediately spellbound" on a first encounter—he "wanted to see how this writing would look in English," so he started to translate. The verbal fascination was not merely that of a technician; it was accompanied, one might say powered, by a possession of the subject matter. The text was *Der Spaziergang* ("The Walk") of Robert Walser. Middleton was twenty-eight—an age at which such possession is still possible—and for him his author was "living . . . everywhere in Zurich and in the bony faces of young peasants" he saw "in the train to Sankt Gallen one day." The testimony is impressive. The form the possession took has, naturally enough, some features which might not be there if the admired writer were not a novelist. Nevertheless, the wanting to see "how this writing would look in English" surely comes close to defining the attitude of any translator who is attracted to his author by something more serious than a publisher's contract. It certainly indicates the approach of a poet who is so impressed by a poem in a foreign language that, out of sheer desire to get closer to it, he sooner or later finds himself trying to write something that, however partially and unsatisfactorily, corresponds with it. This is something different in kind from the approach of more schematic workers who see themselves as juggling with "cultures." It is an essential part of the poet/translator's own progress as a writer and offers the possibility of indirectly improving his own work.

It would be absurd to expect that all the contributors to a collection of "voices from the field" should be translators of this kind. Indeed, the collection would be less valuable, as a pointer to the function and nature of translation, if the editor had not presented us with profound contrasts. The uses of translation, in a world of rapid and massive changes, are many, and the improvement of literature by seeing what can be filched from other literatures can hardly be said to be prominent among them. In some respects, the facility in communication that we now enjoy may be more damaging than useful. One unquestionable characteristic of literature in any serious sense is, in all ages, its rarity, there never being, at any one time, more than a handful of writers, in any one language, who really matter. It is even arguable that the domination of the media threatens the diffusion, or perhaps even the continuance, of literature, far into the future. It is not merely that it is not always the best work that is circulated. The torrents of commercially motivated words emitted are everywhere destroying the kinds of community which appear hitherto to have been essential for the production of important work, and the emergence of such work amidst the

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technological excesses of the future can be no more than a hope. Meanwhile, meanings are thinned to nothing by their very width of reference and by the illusion of familiarity with an ever-widening range of them. The literary translator, concerned with the specific, must always be more impressed by his ignorance: he is, as Middleton puts it, driven to "insert"—and one might say, to *assert*—"his own language roots." The most he can hope for is a tiny modification of his own language by assimilation from a foreign source. The process is never finished, which is why the translation of Greek and Latin classics has gone on fruitfully through the centuries. The enduring importance of any translation is measured not by any theory of cultural equivalents but by the contribution it makes to the translator's own language.

Looking back at Caroline Gordon

Ann Waldron Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance. Putnam, 416 pages, $22.95

Veronica A. Makowsky Caroline Gordon: A Biography. Oxford University Press, 260 pages, $21.95

reviewed by Lauren Weiner

When Caroline Gordon's finest novel, *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* (1934), was republished nine years ago, it was as part of a "Lost American Fiction Series" brought out by Southern Illinois University Press. That about captures the status of the novelist Flannery O'Connor identified in her letters as "the lady who has taught me so much about writing." Caroline Gordon (1895-1981) was the wife of Allen Tate, the mentor of Flannery O'Connor, and the protégée of Ford Madox Ford. Her editor at Scribner's was Max Perkins. One of her biggest fans was William Faulkner (and she was an early and perspicacious booster of Faulkner's). Surrounded by the famous and soon-to-be-famous, Gordon was as serious about the craft of fiction as any writer of her generation, producing nine novels, three short-story collections, two works of criticism, and, with assistance from Tate, an influential textbook/anthology entitled *The House of Fiction*. Yet she was relatively obscure in her lifetime, and is more so today.

A few Caroline Gordon novels sold moderately well; the rest hardly made a ripple. The one she and Scribner's thought had the greatest chance of becoming a best-seller was a Civil War novel, *None Shall Look Back*, which came out in 1937 and promptly drowned in the wake of Margaret Mitchell's 1936 *Gone With the Wind*. Scarlett O'Hara was "a Civil War Becky Sharp, and Lord how they're gobbling it up," Gordon wrote. "They say it took [Mitchell] ten years to write that novel. Why couldn't it have taken her twelve?" Oh, well. Katherine Anne Porter raved about *None Shall Look Back* in the pages of *The New Republic* and John Crowe Ransom sent Gordon a personal letter calling her "a Great Artist" for having written it.

Bad luck was one reason why an occasionally masterful fiction writer never got her due. Then, too, Gordon was often hard to read. So concerned was she with formal technique that several of her works lacked vivid characters and clear plotting. She preached the Jamesian Central Intelligence throughout her career as a writer and teacher, but experimented as well with the full range of narrative points of view (all of them diagrammed by Gordon/Tate with New Critical punctiliousness in *The House of Fiction*).

Gordon is not so ignored that scholars have not produced the occasional book or monograph about her work. And a boomlet of interest seems to have occurred lately, as evidenced by two new biographies, *Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance* by Ann Waldron and *Caroline Gordon: A Biography* by Veronica A. Makowsky. Waldron, a journalist, editor, and writer of children's fiction, has produced

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a long, dense account that is organized diary fashion, in strictly chronological chunks. Makowsky's much slimmer work covers a lot of the same ground, but is a more ambitious attempt to illumine the relationship between Gordon's works and her life.

Close Connections is less than a full-bodied biography; Waldron hazards little analysis or judgment of the facts she is reciting. Nevertheless, her book presents such a thorough catalogue of the facts that it somehow adds up to a full picture of Caroline Gordon, a fiercely assertive distaff member of the tribe of Southern writers known consecutively as the Fugitives, the Agrarians, and, from the 1940s on, the New Critics.

As Waldron explains, the Agrarian credo—that capitalism was ruining the "carefully structured world" of the South—seeped into Gordon's early work. Ransom, Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and others wanted the Old South of small, independent farms to be revived. But though they were Southerners, Tate and Gordon were also Jazz Age bohemians who spent most of the early years of their marriage in Greenwich Village and the Paris of the Lost Generation, where they befriended Ford, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, and the rest. Gordon stated the case in her characteristically unflinching way in one of her letters: "Allen and John Ransom and Don Davidson [a poet and founding member of the Fugitives] would make damn poor field workers . . . . They've formulated the doctrine. Somebody else will have to put it into practice." The Tates did move back to Dixie after Paris, but doing so required the help of Tate's brother Ben, a Cincinnati coal dealer, who purchased an idyllic rural estate for them in Clarksville, Tennessee (they named it Benfolly, after him). "Industrialism, which Allen fought," writes Waldron, "had made Ben's fortune and financed their return to lead an Agrarian life in the South."

Gordon did have an innate love of the soil (Tate, for his part, couldn't stand it), and she was by all accounts as vigorous in the garden as she was in argument with the Agrarians and sundry other figures (Dorothy Day, Malcolm Cowley, Edmund Wilson, Robert Lowell, Jean Stafford) who showed up to take advantage of the Tates' portable "Southern hospitality." But the soil kept shifting as these gypsy-scholar intellectuals exchanged Clarksville for Princeton, Memphis, Minneapolis, Washington, D.C., Bloomington (Indiana), Chicago, and a dozen other places. Waldron's book details Gordon's endless search for yet another house with "just the touch of ruin about it that makes a place attractive to me," a temporary abode where she could write fiction, throw parties, cultivate a patch of earth, and raise their daughter, Nancy (though the girl was often farmed out to Gordon's mother, which Gordon tried to justify to her friends, sounding as if she felt very guilty about it).

Literary production was possible despite this vagabond existence because, as Waldron tells us, wherever she was, Gordon travelled back in her imagination to her childhood home of Merry Mont, on the border of Kentucky and Tennessee. This was the home of her mother's family—the proud, quirky, and inbred Meriwethers. Many of Gordon's stories and novels concern the Fayerlee clan of "Merry Point," such as the story "The Petrified Woman," which first appeared in *Mademoiselle* in 1947. In that story the Fayerlees assemble for their yearly gathering at Arthur's Cave—a fictionalized version of real reunions at Dunbar Cave, where, writes Waldron, "Meriwethers 'of the name and of the blood' came back to the Old Neighborhood to breathe the sacred air." The Meriwethers called themselves "the Connection," which is one of the meanings of Waldron's title, *Close Connections*. The other refers to the various literary coteries the Tates belonged to.

In "The Petrified Woman," dissolute Cousin Tom Fayerlee humiliates his wife, Eleanor, in front of the impressionable young narrator, Sally Fayerlee. The story

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contains a cameo appearance by an important non-Fayerlee. "My father is not connected. He is Professor Aleck Maury and he had a boys' school in Gloversville then," announces the narrator. "My father being no kin to us, they always call me and my brother Sally Maury and Frank Maury, instead of plain Sally and Frank the way they would if our blood was pure." Aleck Maury was not expected to show up at his in-laws' reunion, Sally says, relating her father's usual comment: "'All those mediocre people, getting together to congratulate themselves on their mediocrity! I ain't going a step.' But I reckon he didn't want to stay home by himself and, besides, he likes to watch them making fools of themselves."

Caroline Gordon's father—James Maury Morris Gordon—was, like Aleck Maury, a Virginian among Kentuckians, an interloper among "the Connection," and a schoolteacher who fell into that line of work because he had had a classical education that qualified him for it and because teaching allowed him to spend most of his time pursuing his greatest pleasures: hunting and, in his less agile old age, fishing. Aleck Maury's fox hunting, bird shooting, and fly fishing are described in loving and well-researched detail in several of the short stories, such as "Old Red" (which first appeared in *The Criterion* in 1933), where Maury makes a reluctant visit to stay with his daughter and son-in-law. As he reminisces about Old Red, the fox he spent his youth riding after but never catching, Aleck Maury reflects on his temporary captivity at the familial hearth, and on how well balanced he is. Maury feels fortunate not to have been afflicted with the family disease, *cacoethes scribendi* (the bad habit of writing), like his father who had spouted Shakespeare and original poetry at the dinner table. "He, Aleck Maury, had been lucky to be born in the generation he had. He had escaped that at least. A few translations from Heine in his courting days, a few fragments from the Greek; but no, he had kept clear of that on the whole."

The peculiarly Southern amalgam of scholar and outdoorsman—with his simultaneous love of learning and aw-shucks depreciation of it—is on full display in the novel *Aleck Maury, Sportsman*. We follow Maury from his fox-chasing, Cicero-translating youth, as he sojourns out West on an engineering project, returns home to marry one of the students he tutors, a member of the stuck-up Fayerlee family, and follows his thirst for the "likeliest" fields and streams, relocating his wife and two children to places that afford good sport and a decent teaching job. Gordon's skill in this novel is in showing how a man who is on more intimate terms with his hunting dog, Gyges (so named because he could disappear at will, like the mythical king), than with his own children could be a good family man in his fashion. Gordon's restrained style of writing is at its most affecting when she describes the death of the Maurys' teenaged son and its subtly devastating effect on Aleck's wife and their marriage.

Aleck Maury, Sportsman is also interesting because one section of it (published in 1945 as the short story "The Burning Eyes") offers Gordon's version of Huck Finn and Jim, in the form of young Aleck and Rafe. Rafe, the Negro who initiates Aleck into the mysteries of hunting, is probably the most successfully drawn black character in Gordon's fiction. His integrity emerges naturally from his actions; it is completely unforced. The story "The Enemies" (1938), in which all of the characters are black, seems awkwardly melodramatic in this regard: a man is executed for murdering a young woman, and we see the reaction to the execution among her loved ones, one of whom is her grieving lover—he slits his own throat at the end. Other stories confine themselves to the white characters' view of blacks, which could be described as a kind of amused condescension.

Gordon's own view of race relations is difficult to assess. One comment included by Waldron is that of a New York City cook employed by Mark Van Doren's wife: the cook said Gordon was the only person who treated her as an equal. At the very least, one

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can say that Gordon was on to the problem of Northern moralism. She got it down quite accurately in the story "The Forest of the South" (1944), in which a Union officer is forced to realize that his do-gooder instincts can make no headway in the murky "forest" of the Confederacy he has entered as a conqueror.

Veronica Makowsky, in her own biography of Caroline Gordon, is perceptive about Gordon's choices when it came to representing black characters, maintaining that "The Enemies" is the only story in Gordon's first collection not told by a first-person narrator or central consciousness because the author realized her own limitations. "Unlike Faulkner," Makowsky writes, "Caroline did not attempt to imagine the black experience from the inside." Makowsky's book is not without its flashes of critical insight. Unfortunately, these are buried in a welter of psychologizing. One would expect some of that with an author as autobiographical as Gordon was, but *Caroline Gordon* just plain goes overboard.

If Waldron tends to be slavishly reportorial (she dutifully describes the floor plan of every house the Tates lived in, deferring, no doubt, to the wealth of such information in Gordon's letters), Makowsky, assistant professor of English at Louisiana State University, errs in the other direction. *Caroline Gordon* is chock-full of impressions, hunches, and literary theorizing, but of an intellectually expedient kind.

For all that she treats Gordon's fiction as a direct psychic map, Makowsky's capricious flitting from the life to the work and back again fails to produce a thorough job of either literary criticism or headshrinking. The items one would expect to be of interest to a psychobiographer are often treated cursorily or omitted. Having been told early on, for example, that Gordon believed her mother did not love her and that this affected Gordon's character deeply, the reader comes across the mother's death on page eighty-three, conveyed in a half-sentence sandwiched between Gordon getting drunk with Hart Crane and Gordon letting her housework get in the way of her vocation. And, curiously, Makowsky downplays a major feature of the marital discord between Gordon and Tate. She records only the first infidelity of Tate's—whereas Waldron goes into all of what is known or surmised of the poet's lifelong philandering.

Makowsky's treatment of "The Petrified Woman" is fairly representative. "In autobiographical terms," she begins, "a simplistic interpretation of 'The Petrified Woman' would emphasize the 'look-where-you'd-be-without-me' message that Caroline might be sending to Allen." Despite the (disingenuous) note of apology, what Makowsky goes on to say is not more profound. The year before this 1947 story was written, Gordon and Tate had divorced and remarried in the space of three months, only to separate again. (They would divorce for good in 1959, and Tate would marry another woman, Isabella McCormick, a few days later.) Therefore, continues Makowsky, Gordon's writing "The Petrified Woman" was a way of "performing a deeper self-exploration . . . . Like Sally [the story's narrator], Caroline was frightened by what she was and so demanded of Allen constant reassurances to assuage her insecurity. Like Eleanor [the wife], Caroline was seeking a way of purifying and renewing her life, and she believed she had found it at Robber Rocks during that summer of 1947." The Robber Rocks reference is to Gordon's decision to convert to Catholicism, a decision one is hard put to relate to the character of Eleanor in the story.

Tate said that what drove him to adultery was Gordon's "going Meriwether," retreating into a mythical Meriwether world and leaving him behind. If so—and apparently the mercurial Tate often gave different explanations for his actions to different people—it was a cruel irony that the source of Gordon's inspiration was the same thing that drove from her the man she idolized (and a man who in fact had great respect for her writing). One could certainly believe that, as Gordon grew more and more bitter,

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she was tempted to rehearse the Tates' conflicts in a roman à clef like *The Malefactors* (1956) and to hint therein at a reconciliation unachievable in real life. But one should always keep in mind, as Flannery O'Connor reminded "A.," her famously unnamed correspondent, that well-wrought fiction adds up to more than a demonstration of personality. As O'Connor put it: "What her [Caroline Gordon's] books say to you about their [the Tates'] relationship may be what is most fundamental to it, but is not what you can judge it by, is not what God judges it by, is not what it is, finally."

The Malefactors involves a Catholic lay movement modeled on the Catholic Workers of Dorothy Day, whom the Tates had known since their days in Greenwich Village and who influenced both of them in their decisions to convert to Catholicism. (Day was apparently so put off by some of the activities of "her" character, Catherine Pollard, that she prevailed upon Gordon not to dedicate *The Malefactors* to her, and upon Gordon's publisher, by then Harcourt Brace, to delete certain parts about blasphemous worship rites.)

Neither Makowsky nor Waldron treats Gordon's conversion as a terribly spiritual act. For Waldron it is but the latest of Gordon's obsessional pastimes, after painting and mycology, and for Makowsky it happened because Gordon was on the rebound from marital strife. There may be a grain of truth in the latter assertion. But it also true that, as Makowsky mentions, Gordon believed it was natural for her to be a Catholic because she came to sense a connection between the artist as creator and God as Creator. This Gordon gleaned from the teachings of Jacques Maritain, who was also a great influence on Flannery O'Connor.

Gordon emphasized Maritain's teaching about the subordinate place of women. This was a ratification, both biographies suggest, of what Gordon had always felt—that men were inherently more competent, more suited to action, than women. "Successful male novelists always get rid of the partner of their lean days as soon as they hit the top," she wrote witheringly to Josephine Herbst upon the latter's divorce. Yet if they were morally inferior cads, male novelists (and poets) were better able to make novels and poems than women were, or so Gordon believed. She called herself a "freak" for doing the "unsexing" work of fiction writing, and quoted Dr. Johnson to the effect that a woman at intellectual labor is always a dog walking on its hind legs.

It may be as Makowsky says, when she shakes her head over "this intelligent, spirited, even feisty woman [who] ultimately felt she had to accept the verdict of her male-dominated culture and religion." Or it may be that Gordon's "submission to patriarchal values" made her life more valiant than pitiful. Her will to press on, in defiance of her firm conviction of feminine limitations, is as admirable as it is paradoxical.

Waldron ends her book with the inscription Gordon chose for her tombstone, Jacques Maritain's phrase, "It is for Adam to interpret the voices which Eve hears." Again, though Gordon obviously set great store by the thought, whether she really lived it seems doubtful. Gordon did plenty of interpreting as a highly dedicated teacher of creative writing, in posts that took her, as usual, all around the country, to such schools as Columbia and the University of Dallas. She was apparently very tough on her students, and not universally liked by them. She did not retire from teaching until 1978, when she was eighty-three years old. Her novel writing—itself a form of interpreting the world—went on until her mid-seventies, driven, one supposes, by that *cacoethes scribendi* which was supposed to afflict every other generation. Woman or not, it was her blood right.

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Letters

Edith Wharton redux

To the Editors:

Had James W. Tuttleton attempted to verify his allegations about me in his zealous defense of R.W.B. Lewis (March 1989), he would have discovered the inaccuracy of his assumptions about my work on Edith Wharton. As it is, I am pleased to set the record straight on some aspects of: (1) Edith Wharton's alleged breakdown of 1894-6; and (2) the connections between my current work on the novelist and my past contributions to Mr. Lewis's *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (1975).

Edith Wharton's alleged two-year breakdown during the mid-1890s is but one of many instances in Mr. Lewis's *Biography* in which he advances as fact what ought to have been limited by sketchy evidence to no more than conjecture. In a recent letter to the *Times Literary Supplement*, Mr. Lewis insists anew that "there was undoubtedly a breakdown and a serious one" during 1894-6, although he now hedges on its duration. The "breakdown" plays a crucial part in the *Biography*, in which Edith Wharton's identity crisis—involving both literary and conjugal misery—is ascribed largely to the philistinism of Old New York. The book's fifth chapter, entitled "Breakdown," is the fulcrum of this dual conflict. Partial resolution in the sixth chapter turns upon the novelist's persistence in liberating herself from the "world she had been born into." Her rewards: increasingly robust health, in spite of relapses; and the emergence, between March and July of 1898, of "Edith Wharton's sustained literary career."

When Messrs. Tuttleton and Lewis cite the novelist's own retrospective comments in support of her alleged 1894-6 breakdown, they reveal a naïve, credulous approach to biographical evidence. Her comments prove only that she wrote to certain friends on certain dates, telling them about an old illness and, in at least two letters, placing her vague symptoms in the long-term context of twelve years, not a shorter, specific span of a year or two. Mr. Tuttleton therefore does Mr. Lewis no great service in adducing as proof her letter of April 12, 1908, in which she said that neurasthenic nausea and fatigue had "consumed the best years of [her] youth." Edith Wharton would have been better served by her letter to Sara Norton of May 5, 1904, which suggests a variety of brief ailments instead of a lengthy "total nervous collapse" and, moreover, the patient's resilience, particularly when travel was involved:

> . . . the Riviera climate brought back the nervous indigestion & bad headaches which I had managed to shake off after years of misery, & I was so depressed by this return of my old ailment that I found it hard to write—Finally I ended off with influenza & laryngitis, & as soon as I was on my legs again we started on an enchanting motor-trip across France . . . .

Without effective corroboration, Edith Wharton's retrospective comments about past illnesses offer no direct, factual proof of her having actually suffered a "terrible," "paralyzing," prolonged, "total nervous collapse" in 1894,

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1895, 1896, or, for that matter, any other time, including 1898, when she underwent an authentic "rest cure."

Edith Wharton's unhappy marriage and her ostensibly "deep declared anxiety over her sputtering literary career" may be plausible *reasons* for "a total nervous collapse"; but, even if both actually existed, they are by no means proof that such a collapse occurred, as Mr. Lewis tries to argue in his *TLS* letter as well as in the *Biography*. The unhappy marriage is well documented in archival sources. The supposed literary discouragement in 1894-6, however, is scarcely documented at all: Mr. Lewis has spun it mainly out of a single letter from Edith Wharton to Scribner's (March 26, 1894). Even that letter can be made to comport with Mr. Lewis's reading only when it is wrenched out of the context of the entire 1893-6 Wharton-Scribner's exchange, which is reciprocally professional, cordial, even cheerful.

There is not only little evidence to support the position of Messrs. Tuttleton and Lewis, but also a considerable amount to contradict it. Letters with which they are unfamiliar demonstrate that the novelist could *not* have been incapacitated for two years, or even one year, during 1894-6 by "a total nervous collapse." For, in spite of being intermittently unwell at this time, she was both a busy Newport resident and a vibrant, sophisticated tourist, bicycling in Europe as well as in Newport; sightseeing in France and Italy; reveling in buildings and interiors and ransacking shops for the decoration of houses in America; launching her collaboration on *The Decoration of Houses*; and maintaining a social life on two continents. So much for Edith Wharton's "breakdown."

When it comes to Mr. Tuttleton's discussion of my own work on Edith Wharton, inaccuracies abound. In stating that my forthcoming edition of Wharton letters resulted from my "collaboration" with Mr. Lewis, Mr. Tuttleton is only marginally correct. During 1966-9, at my own expense and volition, I gave a substantial amount of research to Mr. Lewis, who had been chosen to be the novelist's official biographer. In 1969, the Rockefeller Foundation awarded to Yale University a one-year grant that was to enable me "to collaborate with Professor R.W.B. Lewis on the authorized biography of Edith Wharton" and be paid for it. However, by the end of 1970, our differing views on research methods and expenses had prompted me to formulate a project of my own.

My project was to collect, select, and edit Edith Wharton's letters. But by implying that my having been "put under contract" in 1973 was some kind of reward munificently bestowed by Mr. Lewis, Mr. Tuttleton doubly distorts the truth. He omits mentioning not only the ambivalence with which Mr. Lewis consented to my project, but also the extent to which Mr. Lewis at that time acceded to Percy Lubbock's notion that the novelist's letters were not worth publishing. My edition of Wharton letters was thus my idea, not Mr. Lewis's; and it originated in spite of him, not because of him.

Similarly, there is a grain of truth in Mr. Tuttleton's allegations about the cancellation of my publishing contract, but only a grain. He gives the wrong reason—"no progress on the edition seemed evident"—and also omits crucial circumstances. While the unilateral cancellation of my publishing contract was underway in 1983-4, I was doing precisely what I had been directed to do: seeking and finding the funds to finish preparing my manuscript. I was applying for and being awarded, after a lengthy competition, a substantial grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to complete, during 1984-6, the very edition that Mr. Lewis says, in *his* 1988 edition of Wharton letters, I had "long since given up."

Far from there having been "no progress" at all, the unanticipated abundance of my archival research throughout the 1970s and 1980s was precisely what had exacerbated the chronic problem of inadequate financing. By 1983, before Mr. Lewis had even entered the letters-editing arena, I had read and selectively photocopied from more than sixty archives about six thousand letters signed and sent by Edith Wharton, predominantly handwritten. (In 1988, the Lewises, listing fourteen archives, declared the novelist's "usable" letters to total merely four thousand.) In addition, I had dealt with an estimated three thousand of the novelist's unsent, unsigned, filed carbon copies of dictated, typewritten letters (with which I am not yet

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finished), along with an equal number of incoming letters from her correspondents. For the most part, these voluminous typewritten carbon copies do *not* duplicate the six thousand signed-and-sent handwritten letters that are the core of Edith Wharton's correspondence; but they are nonetheless dismissed (unfairly, in my opinion) by Mr. Lewis as dealing "largely with routine business matters." Finally, my research had encompassed a third dimension to an extent that Mr. Lewis's has not: approximately ten thousand non-Wharton letters and other documents containing exceedingly valuable historical and biographical information.

As early as 1976, this archival harvest prompted my original editor to respond to an NEH questionnaire as follows:

> We have not been able to maintain the originally planned publishing schedule; but this is of no concern to us since it is thoroughness, not speed, we are interested in. The nature of Miss Pitlick's book has changed; its scope has been vastly enlarged in proportion to additional material that has become available . . . . We would certainly accept the project today as eagerly as we accepted it in 1973. We are proud to have it.

Had this editor not resigned from the publishing house several months later, I believe that my edition of Wharton letters would long since have been in print. However, it was bequeathed to another editor, whose retirement was too near and whose interests were too remote from mine for her to prevent my book from becoming orphaned. Compounded by insurmountable funding problems, this impasse led to the unilateral cancellation of my publishing contract. The aftermath was then further compounded by a coincidence: a new group of letters from Edith Wharton to W. M. Fullerton surfaced at the University of Texas. Permission to publish these letters and others in *The Letters of Edith Wharton* (1988) was swiftly granted by the Wharton Literary Estate to R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis. It should be emphasized, however, that neither this permission nor the cancellation had anything to do with my alleged lack of progress.

In response to spurious charges of abandonment and "no progress," the preceding account

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would seem to put the burden of proof squarely upon my accusers. Their allegations are certainly not supported by the scope of research documented in my manuscripts-in-progress and in my numerous grant proposals. Moreover, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the continuity and originality of my work, as well as the unremitting labor and financial hardship it has entailed, are substantiated in my correspondence with editors, colleagues, various archives, and several fund-granting institutions. That anyone, including Messrs. Tuttleton and Lewis, should profess to be baffled because I resent having my competence impugned, my credibility assailed, and my career jeopardized, is cause for astonishment. The wonder is that I am not now *more* resentful.

Mary Pitlick
Washington, D.C.

James W. Tuttleton replies:

Ms. Pitlick has conceded that Mrs. Wharton was "intermittently unwell" during the 1890s but takes her frenetic activity, bustling European travel, and "professional, cordial, even cheerful" correspondence with her publisher as evidence that no serious illness afflicted her. Since letters that neither R.W.B. Lewis nor I have read, it is claimed, will document her case, we must await the evidence in Ms. Pitlick's forthcoming *Edith Wharton's Formative Years.*

Still, these letters will require interpretation. I am not surprised that Mrs. Wharton wanted Charles Scribner to believe that all was well. But why would she misrepresent her health to Sara Norton, a close friend? In the letter I cited, Mrs. Wharton complains to her of a serious, ongoing affliction during this period. Has Ms. Pitlick, moreover, considered that Edith Wharton's compulsive activities suggest some kind of manic component? Or that such activities were prescribed as a distraction from her illness? Certainly, some of her contemporaries described her as a driven woman.

On the matter of Ms. Pitlick's contract to edit the letters, I am glad to have clarifications. The fact remains, however, that after a decade no volume of the letters seemed imminent and the task was reassigned to Professor Lewis.

Finally, I must say that I thought the Scribner edition of the letters was inadequate for a writer of Wharton's stature. I should have liked to see two or three volumes, but I have heard that Scribner's insisted on one. However, the difference between four thousand and six thousand letters cited in Ms. Pitlick's letter may not be very significant. The point is what the two thousand other letters contain. Anyone who has read many of Mrs. Wharton's letters in the major archives will know that she repeats herself many times over in a day's correspondence, so that one example will generally do, and that an overwhelming number of her letters are little more than exhaustive itineraries, comparisons of one spa with another, discussions of her garden, detailed directives to out-of-the-way inns discovered in this or that French or Italian provincial town, etc.

I suspect that it was letters of this type that Professor Lewis regarded as comparatively less valuable than the ones he printed. Still, there are many more of genuine substance, available at Yale and other repositories researched by Mr. Lewis, that deserved to be published. I hope that Ms. Pitlick will do a multi-volume edition some day. I'd like to read the best of those letters.

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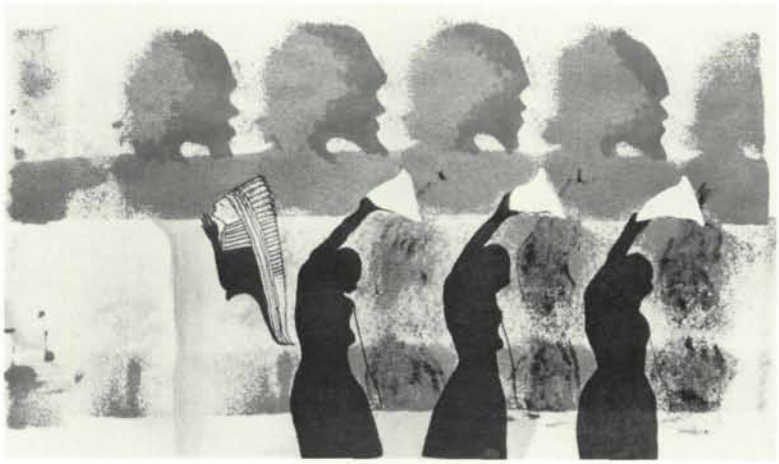

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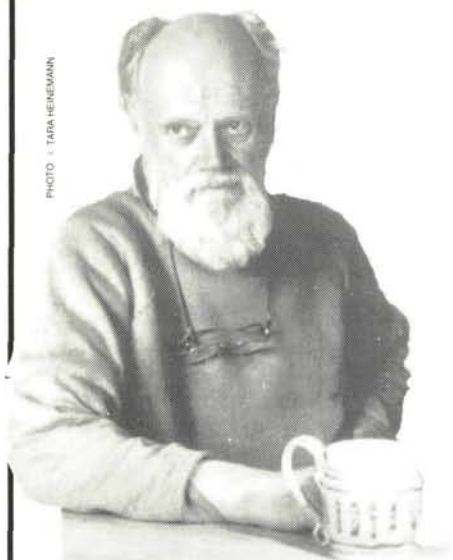

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